

# *Pterostyrax hispidus*, the Fragrant Epaulette Tree

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I began my relationship with fragrant epaulette tree (*Pterostyrax hispidus*) when long-time Arboretum supporter and volunteer Elise Sigel brought me a lanky, homely specimen, wondering if I could give it a home. Elise couldn't recall its full botanical name (some sort of styrax?), and I failed to record even this. I planted it in my Milton garden, not knowing what I had, or how it might grow. Though I don't widely recommend this blind-faith landscape design strategy, in this case I've been delighted with the results.

*Pterostyrax hispidus* is a deciduous tree native to Japan, specifically in the forested mountains of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. A member of the styrax family (Styracaceae), it is closely related to the silverbells (*Halesia*). Though it can grow almost as broad as tall, reaching up to 50 feet (15.2 meters) in height and 40 feet (12.2 meters) in width as a tree, it is more often noted as a large multi-stemmed shrub reaching about 25 feet tall. In fact, it was the shrub form that Arboretum Director C. S. Sargent first saw in 1892 growing "... wild in Japan on the banks of a stream among the mountains above Fukushima."

The leaves of fragrant epaulette tree are oblong with a tapered point and have finely-toothed margins. They range from 3 to 7 inches (7.6 to 17.8 centimeters) long and 2 to 4 inches (5.1 to 10.2 centimeters) wide. Handsomely bright green above and gray-green below in spring and summer, the leaves turn yellow-green to yellow in autumn before dropping. A truly remarkable feature of this plant is its profusion of 7- to 9-inch-long panicles of fringed, downward facing, white flowers that appear in mid to late June (in the Boston area). Hanging below the leaves, the flower clusters sway in the breeze, attracting multitudes of pollinators and giving off a delicate sweet scent. The inflorescences, reminiscent of the fringed epaulettes that once adorned the shoulders of military uniforms as a show of rank, give fragrant epaulette tree its common name. Through the summer, long clusters of indehiscent, bristly dry drupes develop, adorning the tree like

bronze-chartreuse ornaments. These are most evident once the leaves have dropped, looking somewhat reminiscent of dangling sections of a DNA helix.

The Arboretum's accession records for *Pterostyrax hispidus* reveal a history of human interest and persistence in growing this plant. The Arboretum acquired its first accession in 1880 from J. Veitch and Son in England. Over the next 130 years, the Arboretum acquired plants and seeds, including the 1892 accession collected by Sargent in Japan. Many of these acquisitions, though, were of garden origin or uncertain provenance. The Arboretum currently has 3 accessions (9 total plants) of *Pterostyrax hispidus*. Accession 218-60 came to the Arboretum as seed from the University of British Columbia, Canada, but with uncertain provenance. Accession 241-2008, received from Chiba University in Japan as seed, was wild collected in 2006 in Gunma Prefecture, Kanto District, about 20 miles northwest of Tokyo. The third accession, 843-76, came from the Academy of Sciences, Vacratot, Hungary, in 1976 and is also of uncertain provenance.

Though it received the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit in 1993, *Pterostyrax hispidus* remains uncommon in the nursery trade. It is often listed as hardy to USDA Zone 4 (average annual minimum temperature -20 to -30°F), but Arboretum observations over the years indicate that this species may be only marginally cold hardy and is also intolerant of drought. Notes about leader dieback and vigorous basal sprouting imply that this species is more likely to grow as a multi-stemmed shrub in the Boston area.

As the snow has melted from around my now 15-foot-tall tree, I can see that several lower lateral branches have snapped off at the trunk union from the weight of this winter's snow. Even so, it is a plant worth trying in southern New England, even if only on blind faith.

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