

A Dandy for Winter: *Jasminum nudiflorum*

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Discovering eye-catching ornamental interest in the winter landscape can be a challenge, but is by no means an impossible task. Some taxa retain their attractive fruits long into winter, and plants with handsome bark like paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) or colorful stems like red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) stand out like beacons against a snowy backdrop. Truly astonishing, both from a visual standpoint as well as a scientific one, is the odd species that hazards to bloom when most other plants—and indeed most pollinators—lie dormant. *Jasminum nudiflorum*, or winter jasmine, is one such horticultural jewel.

A member of the olive family (Oleaceae), winter jasmine is a hardy member of a genus best known for its potently fragrant tropical and subtropical members. Blossoms of this small deciduous shrub appear before the leaves (its specific epithet means “naked flowers”), borne singly in the leaf axils on the previous year’s wood like its relative, *Forsythia*, which it rather resembles. Winter jasmine’s small, waxy, bright yellow flowers feature funnel-shaped corollas that flare at the end into five or six spreading lobes, giving a starlike appearance. These are described as either non-fragrant or possessing a delicate, mossy scent, but in any event they do not summon the delightful olfactory sensations that makes its genus name synonymous with perfume. Fortunately this shortcoming is redeemed by an extremely lengthy period of bloom, which may last from November to March. In severe winters, some dieback may occur and flowers may suffer damage, but the plant usually rebounds to continue flowering after such events.

Compounding the seasonal interest offered by its flowers, *J. nudiflorum* also delights with arching, willowy green stems that provide further visual relief from winter’s tonal monotony. In spring, stems produce compound leaves that are oppositely arranged and composed of three ovate leaflets, each about ½ to 1 inch (1.3 to 2.5 centimeters) long. Foliage stays a lustrous dark green through the summer and drops in autumn

without any appreciable color change. In the wild, plants produce rather inconspicuous black berries, though cultivated plants appear to be self-sterile.

Perhaps unsurprising for a plant that blooms at the most unforgiving time of year, winter jasmine is a fairly tough customer. It tolerates a wide range of both soil and light conditions, though it grows and flowers best in full sun to part shade in well-drained, loamy soil with regular moisture in USDA Zones 6 to 10. Gardeners also appreciate its versatility of form, growing it as a small (3 to 4 feet [1 to 1.2 meters] tall) shrub or spreading ground cover, or even training it up a vertical surface using supports. Its long, arching branches make it a great choice for cascading over a wall or terrace. Winter jasmine displays incredible vigor as a ground cover; its stem tips root readily where they touch the ground, making it an attractive choice for erosion control. It may sprawl aggressively under the right conditions, but cutting it back will both rejuvenate the plant and produce fewer bare patches in subsequent flowerings. No serious insect or disease problems trouble its robust nature.

Native to China, winter jasmine can be found thicketing slopes and ravines in Gansu, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Xizang (Tibet), and Yunnan. The plant was introduced to the West in 1844, and first described by English botanist John Lindley in the *Journal of the Horticultural Society of London* in 1846. It has gained popularity in Europe and North America as an ornamental, even naturalizing in parts of France and the United States. A small number of cultivars have appeared in the trade, notably ‘Aureum’ with yellow-variegated leaflets and a slow-growing dwarf form called ‘Nanum’.

The Arnold Arboretum has grown winter jasmine since 1885, beginning with a cultivated plant attributed to Charles Sprague Sargent, perhaps cut from his own garden. Today, accessions grow in two locations—in the Explorers Garden (603-81-MASS) on Bussey Hill and in the terraces of the Leventritt Shrub and Vine Garden (654-2003-MASS). Seek them in bloom this winter for a delectable foreshadowing of spring.

