

# Demystifying Daphnes

*Bob Hyland*

I have been a fan of shrubby daphnes for a long time despite their reputation as persnickety and unpredictable garden plants. I love to drink in their heady fragrance when they are in bloom. My first encounter with the genus was with *Daphne odora* (winter daphne)—to be exact, a handsome cultivar called ‘Aureomarginata’. It’s a deliciously sweet-smelling shrub, very reminiscent to me of jasmine. Its leathery leaves are evergreen, a deep, shiny green edged with yellow. The almost white flowers are an attractive reddish purple on the outside.

*Daphne odora* is hardy to USDA zones 7 to 9. With careful siting, a little extra winter protection, and some tender loving care, I was able to coax it into overwintering in my garden in Wilmington, Delaware. Later, in my San Francisco garden, the generally frost-free, Mediterranean climate made the job much easier; in fact, some of my snobbier gardening friends considered it a bit pedestrian.

*Daphne* serves as both the common name and genus epithet of some fifty species of deciduous, semi-evergreen, or evergreen shrubs native to Eurasia (Europe, N.Africa, and temperate and subtropical Asia). The genus is a member of Thymelaeaceae (mezereum family), which includes about forty genera of deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs native to temperate and tropical regions of both hemispheres. Other lesser-known cultivated ornamental plants in this family include *Dirca* and *Edgeworthia*.

The plant’s name may have come from the nymph of classical Greek mythology. As the story is told, Daphne was loved and relentlessly pursued by Apollo, the god of prophecy, music, medicine, and poetry, whose advances she tried to thwart. After praying for help to Gaia, goddess of the earth, she was changed into a laurel tree and evaded her pursuer. It is more likely, however, that the name comes from an Indo-European word meaning “odor.” The root and bark of *Daphne* are said to have been used for toothaches, skin diseases, and

even cancer, which seems odd since all parts of the plant are poisonous.

In the Northeast several *Daphne* species are hardy and have long been cultivated for their handsome foliage and intoxicating fragrance. Daphne flowers are tubular and flare at the mouth into four spreading lobes. They appear on small to mid-sized shrubs that make superb garden plants. Their dense, broad, mounded form is particularly well suited to small, intimate gardens where they can be viewed closeup, but daphnes have a place in any landscape. They combine nicely with many perennials that tolerate sun or partial shade. Good bedfellows include low-growing thymes and sedums, variegated hakone grass (*Hakonocloa macra* ‘Aureola’), sedges (*Carex*), hostas, coral bells (*Heuchera*), and hardy geraniums. Most of their alleged unpredictability can be overcome with careful placement in the garden and good culture. I heartily agree with Michael Dirr and other daphne-philes—a single flowering season would justify their use.

## Growing Daphnes

Daphnes are widely thought to be unpredictable and subject to dying for no apparent reason: many a gardening friend has told me not to get too attached to one. It is true that daphnes dislike extremes of moisture or temperature. Their root systems are picky, preferring not to sit in water or to dry out. Moist but well-drained, humus-rich soil is ideal, and mulching helps keep roots cool in summer. Some English garden books suggest that daphnes do best in limestone soils, but this has not been my own experience. I recommend acidic to slightly alkaline soils. At the Arnold Arboretum, several *Daphne* species grow well in acid soils of pH 4.5 to 5.

Generally speaking, you can plant daphnes in full sun to partial shade, but the foliage, particularly on the variegated leaves, does not like to bake in hot summer sun—afternoon shade is ideal. Daphnes also do not take kindly to trans-



The variegated leaves of *Daphne x burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie'.

planting once established in the garden; it is best to plant container-grown stock in a permanent location. Keep pruning to a minimum, with judicious deadheading and light tip pruning. Do not try to rejuvenate plants by cutting back hard—this can easily sound the death knell.

Besides this basic knowledge, all that's needed for successful daphne culture is planning ahead and some extra tender loving care. Find just the right spot, take the time to prepare and amend the soil, monitor moisture levels, provide a winter mulch over the roots, and daphnes will generally flourish and bloom for many years.

The Arnold Arboretum will offer the following three dazzling daphnes at their fall 2005 plant sale.

#### ***Daphne x burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie'**

This is one of the most striking of all daphnes—for that matter, of all variegated shrubs. A genetic mutation, or sport, of hybrid *Daphne x burkwoodii* (*D. cneorum* x *D. caucasica*), this cultivar was discovered and originally propagated by Carol Mackie in her Far Hills, New Jersey, garden in 1962. Carol Mackie was a passionate

gardener and a very active member and officer of the Garden Club of Short Hills and the Garden Club of America. She developed a deep interest in unusual plants and a very keen eye for the rare and unusual.

Her namesake cultivar is highly prized for its small, intensely green leaves that are handsomely edged in a creamy white to golden yellow. In May and June in New England, the foliage is enhanced by rose-pink buds that unfold to star-shaped, richly fragrant, pale pink flowers borne in dense, terminal umbels, two inches in diameter. Individual flowers are about a half-inch in diameter and are followed by small, red, drupelike fruits.

'Carol Mackie' matures into a dense, mounded shrub that ultimately reaches three to four feet in height and width. It exhibits a tough constitution and is hardy to USDA zones 4 to 8; it was once listed as a "Top Ten" ornamental plant in Vermont. According to Michael Dirr in the fifth edition of his *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, *Daphne x burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie' survived minus 30 degrees F without injury in the University of Maine's display gardens. In

more southerly parts of its hardiness range, the plant remains evergreen through winter.

Tom Ward, co-director of living collections at the Arboretum, holds *D. x burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie' in high esteem. He reports that it has performed well both at the Arboretum and in his own New England garden. If you've had the same success with 'Carol Mackie', you might try a newer cultivar, 'Briggs Moonlight'. Introduced by Briggs Nursery, Elma, Washington, it offers the reverse leaf variegation of 'Carol Mackie', with creamy yellow centers and narrow, dark green margins.

### *Daphne genkwa* (Lilac Daphne)

*Daphne genkwa* hails from China; it was introduced into cultivation in the United States in 1843. An open, deciduous shrub with erect, slender, sparsely branched stems, it is a gem in the spring garden. Axillary clusters of two to seven lovely, one-fourth-to-three-fourths-inch diameter, lilac-colored flowers bloom during May on naked stems of the previous year's growth, just before and while new foliage is beginning to emerge. Floral fragrance is very subtle to nonexistent. Dry, ovoid fruits develop after flowering; they are grayish white and nothing to write home about.

Mid-green, one- to three-inch-long leaves, lance-shaped to ovate, are arranged oppositely (occasionally alternately) on stems. This is unusual among daphne species, which normally sport alternately arranged leaves. Leaves are softly silky when first unfurling.

*Daphne genkwa* is hardy to USDA zones 5 to 7 and generally

matures to three to four feet in height and width. Currently no specimens of *D. genkwa* are planted out in the Arboretum's living collections, but one—descendant of wild-collected plants from the former Czech Republic—is growing in the nursery. The Arboretum's plant



*Daphne x transatlantica* 'Summer Ice'.

records also indicate that wild-collected seed of *D. genkwa* from China was received from E. H. Wilson in 1907.

### *Daphne x transatlantica* 'Summer Ice'

*Daphne x transatlantica* is a newly found hybrid, the result of a naturally occurring cross between *D. collina* and *D. caucasica* (caucasian daphne). It combines the small stature and strong fragrance of *D. collina* with the fragrance and long blooming period of *D. caucasica*. *D. x transatlantica* is a compact, semi-evergreen, mounded shrub that blooms continuously in New England from May to frost with small, delightfully fragrant, white flowers. The late Jim Cross, founder of Environmentals Nursery in Cutchogue, Long Island, is responsible for introducing this hybrid into the nursery trade. He originally sold it as a form of *D. caucasica*, but molecular studies later proved it to be a hybrid that has been named *D. x transatlantica*.

The cultivar 'Summer Ice' grows into a well-behaved, domed shrub that reaches three to four feet in height and width. The delicately variegated leaves sport fine, creamy white edges—similar to but more demure than *D. burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie'. Its spicy white flowers are borne abundantly at the ends of branches in late spring, followed by sporadic summer bloom and a strong fall show. 'Summer Ice' is hardy to zone 5.

Bob Hyland is co-owner and manager of Loomis Creek Nursery, Hudson, New York, public garden consultant, and former vice president of horticulture and operations at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. He frequently writes about plants when not watering.



*Daphne genkwa*.