

False Holly for Autumn and Winter Charm

The garden in late fall and early winter is synonymous with the smell of newly fallen leaves, frosted annuals heaped high onto the compost pile and perhaps, should you be so lucky, the sweet fragrance of False Holly blossoms wafting through the air. Yes, False Holly, botanically known as *Osmanthus heterophyllus*, is a plant that not only blooms in November in central New Jersey, but has far more to offer to the garden!

Undeniably, False Holly is an underused plant in NJ gardens. It is a member of the Oleaceae or Olive Family and the species name was originally penned by the Portuguese Jesuit missionary and botanist João de Loureiro (1717-1791) who first saw members of this genus during his 1777-1781 visit to Canton, China. The name is derived from the



Greek *Osma* or fragrant and *Anthos*, meaning flower – a most appropriate name! *Osmanthus heterophyllus* is native to Japan and was first introduced into the United States in 1856. It was initially named *Ilex heterophylla* by the Scottish botanist George Don (1798-1858) and it was not until 1958 when

the English botanist Peter Shaw Green (1920-2009) correctly reclassified the plant. The species epithet of *heterophyllus* refers to the two distinct forms of foliage that the plant displays during its lifetime. In youth, the juvenile foliage is spiny and resembles that of an American Holly, misleading George Don to name it *Ilex*! As the plant matures, the adult foliage becomes predominant, which has a smooth leaf margin and is much friendlier on the gardener! Another noteworthy difference between *Ilex* and *Osmanthus* is the arrangement of the leaves along the stem; those of *Ilex* are arranged alternately while those of *Osmanthus* are opposite! False Holly is an evergreen shrub and hardy throughout most of NJ, although it will require a protected location in north western NJ. It is tolerant of sun, but is happiest in filtered shade, slowly growing to a height of 15' and over 25' wide in central New Jersey (the plant photographed above was planted in 1939). The fragrant flowers are



produced from early October into November. The flowers are produced in such great

abundance that from a distance the plant appears to be covered by a heavy frost. Better yet, the sweet smell can be detected several hundred feet downwind! Up close, the flowers are small and white, about ¼” across each. They are borne in clusters of 4 or 5 and appear at the base of the leaf axils.

Osmanthus has one additional claim to fame; it is not on the hors-d’oeuvre list for the majority of our deer population. During a winter several years past, a neighboring Gold Mop False Cypress that is often noted as being deer resistant was totally defoliated, while the False Holly remained untouched!



The plant has numerous practical applications in the garden. When left unpruned, the plant can serve as a screen or a backdrop to a perennial garden or a mixed border (a mixture of perennials, grasses and woody plants, offering year-round interest). The plant can also be maintained as a hedge (pictured at left at Longwood Gardens). Unfortunately, since the flowers appear on the current season’s

wood, shearing or heavily pruning of the plant will remove a large portion of the flowers! Also, the repeated heavy pruning of the plant stimulates only the spiny and ‘unfriendly’ juvenile foliage to be produced. Consequently, the only practical application for using *Osmanthus* as a hedge is where deer pressure precludes other hedge plant selections!

There are a number of cultivars of *Osmanthus* available. ‘Gulftide’ is a green foliated form that is also a particularly hardy form for more Northern regions, and supposedly retains the juvenile foliage throughout much of its lifetime. ‘Goshiki’ is currently one of the more popular

cultivars due to its more compact habit of only 8-10’ tall and wide, and its yellow splashed foliage, which fades to cream with age (pictured at right). It gives the appearance of having the happy misfortune of being below the ladder of a very sloppy painter! The new growth is often dappled and streaked with deep pink, shades



of which are repeated in the winter foliage. It has proven to be a very cold hardy



selection and resistant to foliar winter burn in most locations. The flowers are identical in size and fragrance to the straight species. The plants can easily be maintained at 2 to 3 feet in height, making it an excellent candidate for a low variegated hedge. The plants can also be worked into the mixed border since the foliage combines well with a number of herbaceous perennials and annuals. Due to very sparse production of

seed, it is not invasive, and would serve as an excellent substitute for Barberry if you were looking for something that is somewhat spiky! If it is truly a robustly spiky plant you seek, consider the selection 'Sasaba' (pictured above). The leaves are larger than the species with the leaf spines undulating both up and downward along the leaf margin. This plant is unique in that it flowers heavily as a young plant – an exceptional quality since most plants are shy to bloom until they have been established for 8-10 years in the garden. 'Sasaba' has also displayed exceptional winter hardiness at Rutgers Gardens.

As a designer, I have always found it challenging to find evergreen plants which provide a size and scale at maturity appropriate for residential gardens. False Holly certainly meets that challenge. Compound this with fragrant autumn flowers, deer resistance and several unusual and hardy selections from which to choose, it is easy to see why False Holly is a charming plant that more gardeners need to consider for the autumn and winter garden!