

Exploring for New Deep South Ornamentals[©]

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of the plant market is more often than not driven by the “what’s new” question posed by the potential plant customer. Nurserymen are always looking for the new cultivar or even a new species that shows potential for not only the specialty nursery trade, but also the “big boxes” as well. For the past 30 years, I have been on the look out for new finds to introduce to the ornamental market for our discerning customers. And in so doing I have extended this to explore for new plants in foreign countries, mostly in Japan and the United Kingdom. We will examine a number of new cultivars of more familiar species, but also some genera and species which are practically unknown in the nursery trade such as *Platycrater arguta*, *Ajuga incisa* and *Rhodoleia henryi*.

Ardisia japonica is known well in the Deep South as a shade groundcover with relatively few new cultivars being introduced in recent years. We have found many new outstanding large growing, dwarf and variegated forms in Japan where there is a cult of growing and exhibiting this genus in the *Koten Engei* fashion. We could learn something from the Japanese here where the plant can double as both a great pot plant as well as a landscape subject. Some of these are an all green giant form with huge berries, and an extremely dwarf form, more compact than ‘Chirimen.’ The Japanese give few of these cultivar names, so it is left up to us what name to assign to them. Some of the more popular variegated ones are: 1) ‘Hakuakan’ with extremely wide white margins, 2) ‘Amanogawa’ with unusually cut variegated leaf margins, 3) ‘Crinkle’

has an incredible ruffled texture with white margins, 4) 'Maruyama Sunago' with leaves that emerge almost completely white and then harden off to green, and 5) 'Hakuou Nishiki' which has a cream-white splashed variegation with a pewter green background.

Ardisia crenata '**Beni Kajaku**' translates to "Pink Peacock" in Japanese. The new growth emerges as hot pink and burgundy. It has the typical red berries of the species, but the amazing fact is that it comes true from seed which germinate in three months or so. A little amount of chilling usually stimulates germination. This plant makes a stunning pot plant as well as a landscape subject in zones 8-10.

Aspidistra elatior '**Snow Cap**' was found in Japan and named in the U.S. The top one third of the leaf is a stunning white, much more impressive than the more familiar 'Asahi.' This type variegation is far more stable than the streaked type. A great shade evergreen which can also serve as a dependable container plant.

Aspidistra '**Spektacular**' is actually a species form found by Linda Guy of Carolina Nurseries at a street market in China and named by Tony Avent. It sports leaves of 1-1.1 m (40-44 in.) high and heavily speckled with cream white spots. It has proven quite cold hardy in Zone 8. It divides naturally.

Ajuga incisa '**Frosted Jade**' is completely unknown in the U.S. The species is actually listed in the Japanese Red Book of endangered plants. It is so rare that even the experienced gardener can identify it with its deeply cut large leaves with cream white margins. It roots easily, but surprisingly it is not evergreen, dying completely down during the winter.

Albizia julibrissin '**Nurcar10**' **Merlot Majik PPAF**. This selection was developed from breeding *Albizia j.* 'Redleaf Form' found in Japan in the 1990's and backed crossed to itself

twice. Its deep burgundy color lasts much better than 'Summer Chocolate' in the heat of summer and fall. It is propagated by tissue culture and grafting.

Camellia handelii '**Snow Bells**' is an incredible species Camellia which will produce as many as six flower buds at a single node, which then open to 5 cm white flowers lining gracefully pendulous branches. At least zones 8-9.

Camellia sinensis var. *sinensis* f. *macrophylla* '**Yellow Tea**' was found in a garden in Japan and has large irregular yellow splotches on its leaves. It is propagated by semi-hardwood cuttings during the fall on bottom heat.

Camellia sinensis '**Silver Dust**' has foliage which emerges almost completely white and later hardens to green. Flowers are single white as with the species: not overly showy.

Camellia azalea is a new named species found in China in the mid 1984. It will flower continuously in a greenhouse setting and was thought to be almost tropical, but it has survived in the landscape to -7 °C (-14 °F). The hope for using it to breed summer flowering Camellias has not proved effective, as it is difficult to cross with other species. It roots easily, but does not survive on its own roots, but grafting is quite successful.

Camellia granthamianum is a species with gargantuan 15-20 cm white flowers with stunning yellow stamens. Hardy if protected well into zone 7.

Eurya japonica '**Moutiers**' (aka 'Green Thinly Margined') is in the Tea family *Theaceae*. It is much more compact than any Camellia with a plethora of small cream-white flowers under its stems. It makes a very popular subject for even the inexperienced gardener with its attractive color and form. There are numerous variants in Japan with variegated foliage and no cultivar names.

Eriobotrya japonica '**Variegated**' has to be one of the most eye-catching foliage plants in the landscape, with its broad white margins to leaves up to 25 cm long. Grafting is the method of propagation in Japan; although tissue culture is going to be attempted here.

Fatsia japonica '**Murokumo Nishiki**' (Cluster of Clouds Brocade) has irregular green margins with a gold center. This is a centuries-old cultivar in Japan where it was almost lost to cultivation. A small plant can sell for hundreds of dollars in Japan. We are attempting to tissue culture it for more rapid propagation. 'Spider Web' has a white reticulated variegation which is already produced by tissue culture.

Fatsia japonica '**Angyo Star**' was named by me from the nursery district in Japan where I found it. It is the best variegated form of this popular species which makes an excellent container plant or in the landscape.

Illicium anisatum '**Deep Purple**' has leaves which emerge a deep glossy burgundy and then gradually harden to green. Each succeeding flush through the growing season produces the same burgundy leaves.

Polyspora (Gordonia) axillaris '**Shibamichi Select**' is the Asian equivalent to our native *Gordonia lasianthus* but it differs in having much larger flowers which open from mid October to mid December. It can have as many as 15 or more flower buds congregated around the terminal bud. Roots well with fall cuttings. Best in zones 8-9.

Hydrangea serrata '**Golden Crown**' has a white lacecap inflorescence, but its most spectacular feature is its golden new growth which matures to green.

Hydrangea aspera '**Burgundy Bliss**' is a burgundy foliage form of this species found in China. It is more difficult to root but worth the effort.

Hydrangea petiolaris is often confused in Japan with *Schizophragma*, but these two cultivars have silvery and white new growth. 'Early Light' hardens off to green, but the other yet unnamed cultivar keeps its variegation of silver and white with no fading. The best variegated forms of this species yet.

Platycrater arguta is an almost unknown genus in the nursery trade from the family *Hydrangeaceae* with a compact form and an inflorescence of delicate sterile and complete flowers in loose terminal panicles. 'Kaeda' has larger white flowers than the species and 'Rosea' has delicate pink flowers. An easily grown shade shrub which does well in zones 7-9.

Ilex cornuta 'Masashi Gold' appears to be a new variegated variant of the more familiar Burford holly. Its gold coloration has to be the brightest in the genus *Ilex*.

Jasminum mesnyi 'Sunglo' is the only variegated form of our familiar Primrose Jasmine with brilliant gold new growth and double yellow flowers. This is definitely an item for "big box" stores.

Loropetalum chinense has many new forms. This is an unnamed bicolor form which has all green leaves, but appears to be much more stable than the old 'Bicolor' cultivar. We are told that there is a bright yellow form.

Magnolia (Michelia) fordiana 'Shibamichi Gold' has surreal fluorescent gold new growth and the species has proven to be much more cold hardy than expected, at least zone 7 if not colder. The flowers are just an added bonus. It is propagated by grafting but would be worthwhile to attempt tissue culturing.

Magnolia (Michelia) skinneriana var. *crassipes* has deep burgundy colored flowers with an intoxicating fragrance. Can be easily grafted, but we need to improve rooting it via cuttings. Zones at least 8-9, if not 7.

Mallotus japonicus is mostly a botanical garden subject in the *Euphorbiaceae* family which makes a small tree, with terminal summer panicles of fragrant white flowers. This is an unnamed variegated form that I found in Japan which has proven very stable. Roots easily from softwood cuttings. Zones 7-10.

Osmanthus fragrans affords us many options for the Southern landscape. 'Fudingzhu' has the heaviest flower production of any cultivar. Var. *aurantiacus* produces bright orange fragrant flowers, and 'Beni Kin Mokusei' is the famed "red" flowering form with brilliant orange-red fragrant flowers.

Pittosporum tobira 'Bridal Bouquet' flushes with almost pure white new growth which hardens to green. Each succeeding flush through the growing season produces the same effect. The new growth resembles a truss of white rhododendron in full flower.

Quercus myrsinifolia is rarely considered a species with cultivars, but this one performs similarly to *Pittosporum* 'Bridal Bouquet' with its white new flushes of new spring growth.

Podocarpus macrophyllus has always been a staple in the U.S. Deep South nursery trade, with no color variants. But 'Royal Flush' emerges with bright pink new growth and 'Golden Crown' has bright yellow flushes. Roots well during winter on bottom heat, but is also being attempted in tissue culture.

Rhodoleia henryi is probably the most exciting new species that I have found in Japan, which unlike *Rhodoelia championii*, is hardy to zone 7, if not zone 6. *Flora of China* reports it at elevations of 2500 m. It is in the family *Hamamiliaceae*, along with *Loropetalum* and *Witchhazels*. It has stunning geometric hanging flowers, and is an evergreen and can reach tree proportions.

CONCLUSION

These exciting new selections are enough to excite the most jaded gardener. Some propagate quite readily by conventional means such as cuttings and grafting, but others will probably have to be produced via tissue culture to facilitate building-up enough numbers for the expanding commercial market. None-the-less, the exploration of new selections can be one of the most rewarding aspects of the nursery trade.

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