

Great Plants for Southern Gardens That Missed the Marketing Push®

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INTRODUCTION

The JC Raulston Arboretum (JCRA) has a 35-year history of collecting and evaluating new plants for introduction to the nursery industry. New plants drive the industry especially those that have a marketing push behind them. Many great landscape plants get passed over in the rush for the latest and greatest but deserve a second look.

The JC Raulston Arboretum (JCRA) has grown from the first plant the JCRA planted in the mid-1970s. Conifers which were not supposed to survive in the south have grown into mature specimens. Gardens and collections have been planted, grown up, torn out, and re-established. Students have been the mainstay of the arboretum development and have done a great job when given adequate direction.

The JCRA's collection holds many great landscape plants that may never make it to the mainstream due to propagation difficulties. Other plants have shown they have great potential for the south.

DECIDUOUS SHRUBS

Rhododendron 'Yoshino' has proven its worth in the arboretum with leathery, semi-evergreen foliage and trusses of bright flowers in March. The growth habit is much different than many other evergreen azaleas and is used extensively as a hedging plant in Japan. *Hydrangea hirta* is an underused member of the genus that suffers from not having the sterile florets of other landscape hydrangeas. The glossy, pale green foliage, powder-puff flower clusters, and great habit make it worth its place in the garden. *Corylopsis* is well known to plant enthusiasts but the dwarf *C. gotoana* 'March Jewel' from Camellia Forest could be a big hit with the general public. Growing 6 m × 1.5 m (2 ft × 5 ft) with primrose yellow flowers, pest-free blue-green foliage, and butter yellow fall color 'March Jewel' is sure to be a hit. *Lindera triloba* is a little known Japanese shrub with reddish new growth and brilliant fall color. Even less well known is the die-back fig, *Ficus gasparriniana* var. *laceratifolia*. Small figs turn bright red in fall and complement the roughly serrated foliage.

TREES

Maples are well established as landscape specimens but there are relatively few species that are smaller than *Acer rubrum* but larger than *A. palmatum* which are commonly grown. *Acer mono* deserves to be grown more widely. Its great form, fall color, urban tolerance, and size make it perfect for many applications. *Cornus wilsoniana* is another overlooked tree that shows promise with flat clusters of white flowers, blue fruit, spectacular bark and semi-evergreen foliage. For a more familiar species, *C. florida* 'Suwanee Squat' has been a great grower for us, and is 0.6 to 0.9 m (2 to 3 ft) tall and 1.5 to 1.8 m (5 to 6 ft) wide. It covers itself with broad

bracted flowers. It has good mildew resistance, good fruiting, and good fall color. Some have had trouble with it in the garden, but ours and propagules from it have been strong growers. It fills a 1-gal container in 1–2 seasons from cuttings. Less well-known, but very impressive, is *Meliosma parviflora*. It has white, panicles of scented flowers like astilbe give rise to masses of candy, apple red fruit. As attractive as the fruit is, the bark is even better. It can be propagated by seed or softwood cuttings taken from late May to July. *Styrax* has made its mark in the trade, but its relatives are mostly absent. *Sinojackia xylocarpa* 'La Grima' (Styracaceae family) is an upright form from Highland Creek Nursery. Masses of white flowers are as showy as almost any other spring-flowering tree with good yellow fall color. It is propagated by softwood cuttings in late May to early June, or by semi-hardwood cuttings in late June to July. Cuttings taken later in the season must be kept above -4°C the first winter to ensure survival.

EVERGREENS

Space is a premium in many landscapes both residential and commercial. Upright plants like *Juniperus formosana* deserve wider use where the narrow form but relaxed branching is especially nice. It can be difficult to root, but semi-hardwood to hardwood cuttings with bottom heat and 8,000 ppm K-IBA seem to root well. Another upright plant with potential is the holly, *Ilex buergeri*, with reddish new growth, narrow habit, and red fruits on female forms. It is propagated by hardwood or softwood cuttings during most of the year. Another holly with potential for southern gardens is the entire-leaved *I. rotunda* with glossy, thick textured foliage and large fruits. *Cephalotaxus harringtonia* 'Mary Fleming' is perhaps the most prostrate of any plum yew growing low with a distinct layered form. It is propagated by hardwood cuttings. *Mahonia gracilis* is a non-spiny species from Mexico with glossy foliage and a rounded habit. Bright gold flowers are held on red peduncles and followed by blue fruit. It can be propagated by seed or hardwood cuttings. Another rounded evergreen shrub, but with much finer texture, is *Pittosporum parvilibum* with yellow, somewhat fragrant flowers. It can be grown as a small tree or cut back to keep small. It is perhaps one of the hardiest of the pittosporum and easily propagated by softwood to hardwood cuttings. *Metapanax davidii* is a much confused and mis-identified plant in gardens and literature, this fatsia relative sports simple to 3-lobed leaves on a mounding evergreen shrub or small tree. There is considerable variation in plant size, shape, and leaf morphology over the plant's native Chinese and Vietnamese range.

VINES

Vines can be a tough sell, especially those that don't have big flowers but a pair of vines that have potential are the evergreen *Kadsura longipedunculata* and the deciduous *Heteropterys glabra*. The former grows densely making it perfect for covering an arbor or screen. Creamy white flowers are held on long stalks below the foliage followed by rounded clusters of red flowers. The latter, a scandent plant from Uruguay, starts flowering early with yellow flowers which continue until frost. The flowers are followed by red samaras that are almost identical to maple fruits but held in 3s, instead of pairs. The flowers and fruits combine for an interesting display. Young plants may die back to the ground. Both can be propagated by cuttings, the *Heteropterys* is also quick and easy from seed.

HERBACEOUS PLANTS

While the JCRA concentrates on woody plant material, some herbaceous plants catch our eye. *Gloxinia nematanthodes* 'Evita' (syn. *Seemania* (*Sinningia*) *nematanthoides* 'Evita'), a gesneriad, is a bright red-flowered perennial for shade which spreads rapidly and has attractive velvet foliage. It is propagated by dividing the scaly rhizomes. Recent JCRA trips to Taiwan have led to new plant selections which are showing potential. The deep green strappy foliage of one collection of *Dianella ensifolia* is attractive, has so far proven to be hardy, and has garnered much attention from visitors. Another Taiwan introduction, *Sedum nokoense*, makes an attractive, tight mound with gold flowers and burgundy tinted leaves. It should be grown on lean soils to avoid flowering itself to death.

While new plants always bring excitement to the garden and the nursery, lesser known but exceptional plants that missed the market — still hold out promise.