A Few of our Favorite Things

Highlights from the 2015 Members’ Plant Giveaway

Tiffany Enzenbacher, Manager of Plant Production

The Arnold Arboretum makes for an exceptional destination during any season, but the vibrantly colorful foliage and fruits of fall provide abundant beauty and interest. What makes autumn particularly exciting for all of us at the Dana Greenhouses is our opportunity to share some of our propagation and cultivation efforts with members of the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum through the annual Plant Giveaway (see back inside page).

The majority of our offerings are collected as propagules from Arboretum staff favorites in our living collections or recent domestic and foreign expeditions, with a focus on providing a diverse assortment of deciduous trees, shrubs, and vines, as well as conifers, for various growing locations. Dana Greenhouse staff and Hunnewell interns have sowed seeds, stuck cuttings, transplanted seedlings, and tended to our offerings to prepare them for their permanent home with members. In anticipation of the event on September 19, I’d like to highlight a few of the interesting plants we’re preparing.

*Sarcococca hookeriana var. digyna* (sweetbox)

Having difficulty establishing turf or small shrubs beneath a large pine? This rare evergreen shrub with year-round interest may offer a great solution. Summer foliage is a glossy dark green, which changes to shades of maroon as winter approaches. Separate apetalous male and female flowers, ivory in color and emitting a sweet fragrance (hence the common name, sweetbox), are borne beneath the foliage in spring. These give rise to small black drupes in summer that persist into winter. Sweetbox attains a height of 18–24 inches, with a wider spread due to stoloniferous growth, and performs best in part-shade to shade when grown in acidic and highly organic soil. A specimen growing behind the Dana Greenhouses thrives in part-shade, beneath a grove of mature Hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*). Sweetbox is native to the Western Himalayas and Afghanistan, and is hardy in Zones 6–8.

*Elsholtzia stauntonii* (mint shrub)

If your green thumb compels you to seek something out of the ordinary, mint shrub will certainly strike a chord. Seeds for the Giveaway plants were derived from our original accession growing in the Explorers Garden, which was collected in China in 1905 by J. G. Jack, famed Arboretum dendrologist, educator, and explorer. Mint shrub features eye-catching, 4–8 inch long, magenta-pink panicles from September into October. Slender, 2–6-inch long leaves emit a minty fragrance when crushed. Mint shrub is semi-woody and can attain 3–5 feet in height and width. Because it flowers on new growth, the plant can be pruned back in spring without impacting flowering. Performs best in full sun with well-drained soil, and is hardy in Zones 5–8.

*Magnolia salicifolia* (willowleaf magnolia)

Willowleaf magnolia promises a truly head-turning addition to a front yard landscape. Its white, perfumed, 4-inch wide blooms open in spring for a striking, unparalleled early-season display. Lustrous green leaves emerge after flowering, and blossoms give way to 3-inch long rose fruits containing brilliant red seeds. When crushed, the stems emit a nice lemony scent. The smooth, gray bark provides interest all year round, and its slim, pyramidal habit is also very attractive. Willowleaf magnolia may attain a height of 20–30 feet, and is hardy in Zones 4–7. The much-anticipated spring blossoms of *M. salicifolia* trees growing near the Hunnewell Building and in the Explorer’s Garden are not to be missed, and in time will grace your own landscape as a reward for enduring our New England winters. 

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