

Winter Blooming Shrubs

by RICHARD E. WEAVER, JR.

Winters in the eastern part of this country south of Washington, D.C. are seldom as unpleasant as they are here in the Northeast. Of course the temperatures there are less extreme, but for those of us who appreciate plants and flowers, the real difference is perhaps due to the Camellias. Blooming through the worst weather that January and February have to offer, these wonderful plants with their bright and showy blooms make winter something almost worth anticipating.

Although there are some hopeful new developments through concentrated breeding efforts, we in most of the Northeast still must do without Camellias in our gardens. Nevertheless, there are a surprising number of hardy shrubs, perhaps less showy but still charming and attractive, that will bloom for us through the winter and the early days of spring. Some, such as the Witch Hazels, are foolproof; others present a challenge for they are susceptible to our capricious winters and may lose their opening flowers to a cold March. For those gardeners willing to take the chance, a few of the best early-flowering shrubs displayed in the border, or as the focal point in a winter garden, will help to soften the harshness of the season.

Many plants that bloom in the early spring have their flowers perfectly formed by the previous fall. Certain of these do not require a period of cold dormancy, and in mild climates will flower intermittently during the fall and winter. Most species, however, do require an environmental stimulus, usually a period of cold temperatures, before the buds will break and the flowers open. Occasionally these species will bloom in the fall, particularly if there has been a sharp drought during the summer, followed by a cool, wet period during the early autumn. The very early blooming shrubs discussed in this article are particularly prone to this abnormal fall flowering, and the expanded or partially expanded flowers are invariably frozen later, substantially diminishing their spring display.

Although the flowers of all of the species discussed here can withstand temperatures below freezing, they will be destroyed by extreme cold. In my experience, the flowers, except for those of the species that normally flower during the very cold months, will be nipped when the temperatures fall much below 20° F; those of several species will not take temperatures even this low. Therefore for best bloom, these latter early-blooming shrubs should be planted in a cold micro-

climate, such as an area of the yard that is somewhat shaded during the winter. Blooming then will be slightly delayed, reducing the chances that the flowers will be destroyed by cold temperatures in the spring, even though somewhat defeating the objective of having early-blooming plants. Alternatively, a spot by a sunny wall, or on the south side of a house, should be selected. Here bloom will come early, but air temperatures will be modified by the wall, again reducing the chances of having the flowers nipped. The latter exposure is preferable, particularly for those species that are somewhat tender, as well as for those that do not bloom well in shade.

The following plants are ones that can be expected to begin blooming before the end of March, or by the first week in April at the latest. All are hardy in Zone 5 except where noted. The list is not an exhaustive one; a few other shrubs sometimes bloom early enough to be included, for example the Shadbushes (*Amelanchier* spp.), the Cornelian Cherries (*Cornus mas* and *C. officinalis*) and Forsythias (especially *F. ovata*), but these have already been discussed in detail in recent *Arnoldia* articles and need not be repeated here. The arrangement of the plants is more or less by their order of bloom.

***Hamamelis* — Witch Hazel**

The Witch Hazels are the premier winter-blooming trees and shrubs for northern areas of the United States. I have already discussed them in a recent article (see references), so their treatment here will be brief. The winter of 1976-1977 has been characterized by prolonged periods of cold weather, and the blooming time of the Witch Hazels has been delayed. Some plants of *Hamamelis virginiana*, our native species, were still in full bloom in early December, but abnormally cold temperatures during the first week of the month destroyed the flowers. Then a warming trend brought the Ozark Witch Hazel (*H. vernalis*) into partial bloom at least two weeks ahead of schedule. Very cold temperatures during the rest of December, all of January, and early February did not damage the partially expanded flowers of this species, but further bloom was delayed, and the plants were not in full flower here until the last week of February, a month or more late. *Hamamelis mollis* and the cultivars of *H. × intermedia* were also somewhat delayed. The former usually flowers here about the end of January, but this year the petals were not fully expanded until the end of February. Our wonderful specimen of *H. × intermedia* 'Arnold Promise' next to the Administration Building usually delights us with its profuse bloom in mid-February. As of this writing (1 March), the petals of its bright yellow flowers are just visible. We will be patient and will be rewarded, but this winter, more than most others, the touch of color the Witch Hazels usually provide would have been welcome a bit earlier.



Left: *Chimonanthus praecox*, taken from Curtis's Botanical Magazine, vol. 13, plate 466.

Right: *Jasminum nudiflorum*, taken from Botanical Register, vol. 32, plate 48.

***Jasminum nudiflorum* — Winter Jasmine**

This native of China is a member of the Olive family, and its bright yellow flowers appearing on leafless branches suggest those of *Forsythia*, a much more familiar plant of the same family. Flowers of Winter Jasmine have six corolla lobes ("petals") instead of four, however. The sessile (stalkless) flowers, often nearly an inch across, are borne in pairs along the slender, green branches, beginning as early as mid-January in mild winters. The species is marginally hardy in the Boston area, although it is the hardiest of the true Jasmines, and it often does not bloom freely here unless it is grown in a sheltered spot. The plant itself is somewhat of a scrambler, with long, flexible branches. Because of its growth habit, and its unreliable hardiness, the Winter Jasmine is best grown against a sunny wall. It will have to be supported, however, because the plant is not actually a climber.

***Chimonanthus praecox* — Wintersweet**

The common name of this Chinese native is well chosen, since its spicy fragrant flowers appear during the dead of winter. The shrub is not a familiar one in this country, and indeed it is virtually unknown to New England gardeners since it is hardy only into Zone 7. It blooms reliably in Philadelphia, but even there the flowers often suffer from exposure to wind and snow, and the plant is best grown in a sheltered spot.

Wintersweet is a relative of *Calycanthus*, our familiar Sweet Shrub or Carolina Allspice, and the flowers of the two are similar in overall structure. Those of the Wintersweet, however, are usually only about an inch across, and the fifteen to twenty petal-like segments are a translucent yellow, the innermost ones heavily streaked and blotched with purple. Several varieties with slightly different flowers are occasionally encountered. *Chimonanthus praecox* var. *grandiflorus* has flowers almost twice the size of those of the typical plant, but they are only slightly fragrant. The flowers of the var. *concolor* (var. *luteus*) are entirely yellow, and they often are sparingly produced.

Although cultivated in Japan for centuries, the Wintersweet did not reach Western gardens until the middle of the Eighteenth Century. In our gardens it forms a much-branched shrub as tall as 10 feet. The leathery but deciduous, prominently veined leaves are opposite on the twigs, and lance-shaped to oval in outline.

Like most of the winter-flowering shrubs mentioned here, the Wintersweet is not a showy plant. The flowers are perhaps more unusual than beautiful, and they are best appreciated close at hand where their wonderful fragrance is evident.

***Erica* — Heath**

This genus, from whose name are derived the Latin and common names of a large and horticulturally important family of plants, includes several species and hybrids that are among the most charming additions to the list of winter-blooming shrubs. These are also low in stature, with finely-textured foliage, enabling them to be used effectively as complements both to the early spring bulbs as well as the taller shrubs that are the nucleus of the winter garden.

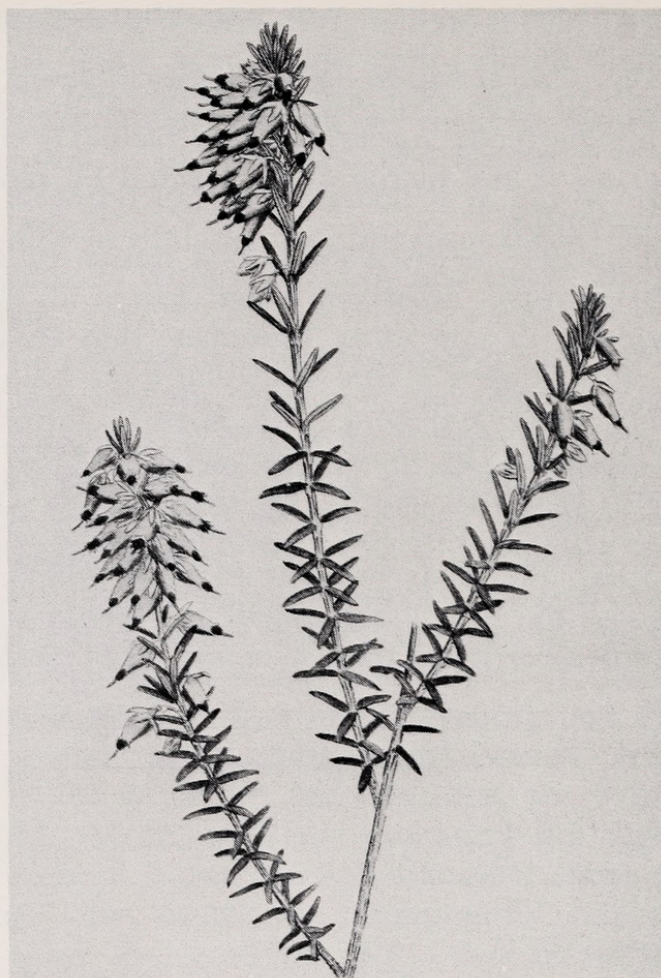
Although a number of *Erica* species grow to be trees, the hardy species, and particularly those included here, are low or even almost prostrate shrubs. The descriptions that follow pertain to the winter-flowering plants. The leaves are basically needle-like, spreading in whorls of four around the branches. The flowers are produced on the upper part of the branches, forming one-sided "spikes." The flowers themselves, about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch long, are narrowly bell-shaped or cylindric, with the brown to nearly black anthers protruding and conspicuously contrasting with the white to pink or purplish corollas.

Heaths grow and bloom well in full sun or partial shade. Like all members of their family, they prefer acid soils; Heaths evidently will flourish also in soils that are nearly neutral. The plants discussed below are perfectly hardy, but the bloom is apt to be more reliable and earlier if the plants are protected by pine boughs during the coldest months.

The hardiest species is *Erica carnea*, a native of the mountains of south-central Europe. Most cultivated forms of this species are very low growing with spreading branches, and they make a fine ground cover. The flowers of the wild plant are pale pink, but numerous cultivars have appeared with flowers ranging from pure white to deep reddish. The most commonly available winter-flowering cultivars are described below. In all of these, the flower buds are large and conspicuous by the beginning of the winter. Depending on the weather, they may open as early as January, but even if covered with snow the plants are usually in bloom by early March. Blooming continues for more than a month afterwards.

'King George' — Foliage dark green; flowers deep rose-pink with purple-black anthers; flowers freely produced on short spikes.





Erica carnea, taken from Curtis's Botanical Magazine, vol. 1, plate 11.

'Springwood Pink' — Foliage midgreen; flowers nearly white, gradually changing to clear pink; vigorous, spreading, and free-flowering.

'Springwood White' — Foliage bright green; flowers white with brown anthers; vigorous and spreading with long spikes of flowers.

The plant known as *Erica* × *darleyensis* is probably a hybrid between *E. carnea* and the tender *E. mediterranea*. The flowers are similar to those of the first species, but the plants are more upright in growth, sometimes attaining a height of 18 inches. Although perfectly root hardy in Zone 5, cultivars of *E.* × *darleyensis* may suffer some winter damage here, and the blooming may not be profuse without the protection of a snow cover or a light mulch during the coldest months. This hybrid is represented by the following readily obtainable cultivars.

'Arthur Johnson' — Foliage light green; flowers mauve-pink in very long spikes, and therefore useful for cutting.

'Silberschmelze' — Foliage dark green; flowers pure white with brown anthers; free-flowering, and forming a neatly rounded plant.



Daphne mezereum (left) and *D. m. forma alba* (right).

***Daphne mezereum* — February Daphne**

Although this delightful plant does not flower here as early as its common name implies, it can be relied upon to brighten our shrub borders from the last half of March through much of April. Besides providing welcome color during the drab first days of spring, the flowers are extremely fragrant, and they are followed in the late summer by brightly colored fruits.

The flowers are borne profusely in small clusters directly on the branches. Although they originally appear long before the leaves, some flowers may persist until the leaves are in evidence. The blooms are a bit unusual in that what appear to be petals are actually four colored sepals united into a tube. Their color is typically a dull pinkish-purple, but a whitish variant (*Daphne mezereum* forma

alba) is occasionally encountered both in the wild and in cultivation. The pink flowered plants produce bright red fruits in August and September while the white-flowered ones bear yellow fruits. The plants grow slowly to a maximum of 3 to 4 feet, and seldom need pruning, and they flower well even when grown in the shade.

Several very fine cultivars are grown in Europe, and if introduced into this country could greatly enhance the appeal of an already most desirable plant. They include: 'Paul's White' or 'Bowl's White', with pure white flowers; 'Grandiflora' ('Autumnalis') with larger flowers which, at least in England, appear from October through February; 'Rubra', with reddish-purple flowers; and 'Plena', with double white flowers.

Individuals of many *Daphne* species, including this one, have the disconcerting habit of flourishing for years and then suddenly dying for no apparent reason. Several explanations for this phenomenon have been offered, but none appears to be satisfactory. When conditions are just right, however, *D. mezereum* prospers, as evidenced by the fact that this native of Europe and Siberia has become naturalized several places in the United States and Canada.

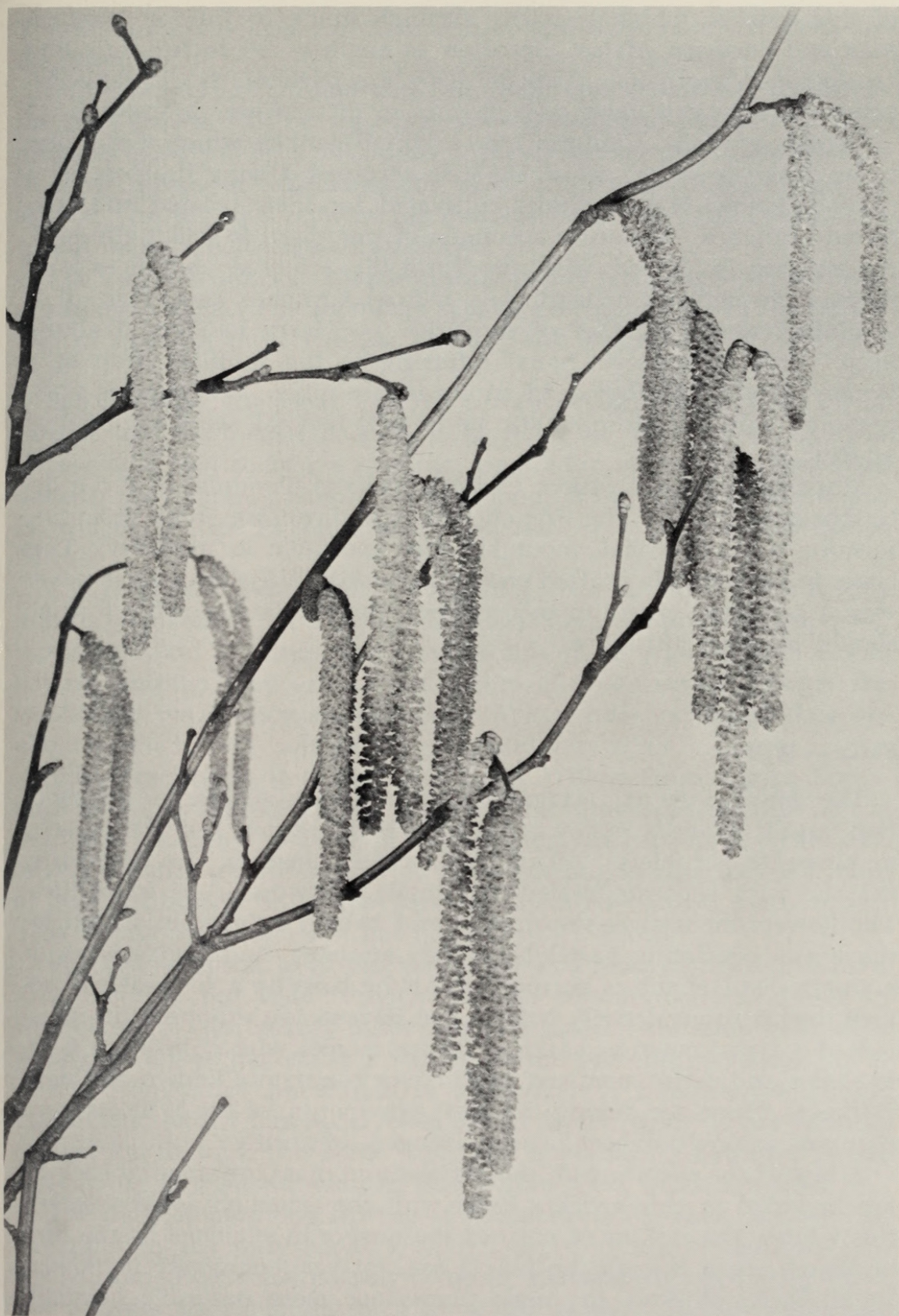
Presumably because of their fleshy roots, Daphnes have a reputation for being difficult to transplant. However, by moving them in the spring and keeping them moist well into growth, I have not encountered problems, even with fairly large individuals.

It must be pointed out that all parts of the plants of *Daphne* species contain seriously poisonous compounds. They are basically attractive to children only when in fruit, so that danger of poisoning may be greatly reduced by removing the "berries" before they ripen.

***Corylus* — Hazelnuts**

All of the Hazels bloom early in the spring, before the leaves have expanded. The plants are monoecious; that is, with separate pistillate ("female") and staminate ("male") flowers borne on the same individual. The pistillate flowers are inconspicuous, obvious at all only because of the feathery red styles protruding from what merely appear to be buds. The staminate flowers are borne in long pendulous catkins that are in evidence throughout the winter. Usually during the last half of March, they elongate and open, exposing the yellow anthers and pollen. In many species the catkins are borne profusely. Although not exactly showy even then, the catkins are conspicuous and delicately beautiful, and the aspect of the plant is certainly pleasing. The familiar nuts, which ripen in midsummer, are an added bonus for growing these plants.

Perhaps fifteen species of *Corylus* are in cultivation, but only one will be singled out here. Selected clones of the European Hazelnut, *C. avellana*, are the primary source of the commercial Hazelnuts, and this species is one of the most attractive in flower. The catkins



Corylus avellana. Photo: H. Howard.

of this species, which is native through much of Europe, western Asia and northern Africa, are often as much as 2½ inches long and are borne in profusion. Two cultivars are particularly desirable because their growth habit adds greatly to their winter interest.

Corylus avellana 'Contorta', the original plant of which was found in an English hedgerow in 1863, is certainly among the best of a class of rather bizarre plants cultivated for their twisted and contorted branches. A mature specimen of this plant is striking indeed, particularly in flower, with the vertically oriented catkins set off against the network of intricately twisted branches and twigs. It is available from a number of nurseries as "Harry Lauder's Walking Stick," this picturesque name referring to the familiar prop of a famous Scottish performer of an era before mine. The plant is slow-growing, with the ultimate size perhaps 8 feet tall with a spread of 10 feet.

Much rarer in cultivation, *Corylus avellana* 'Pendula' is also a desirable ornamental. The branches of this shrub are stiffly drooping, forming a symmetrical, mound-shaped specimen at maturity. This clone is occasionally grafted onto a standard. Although I have never seen a specimen grown in this manner, the result, somewhat formal, should be most attractive.

Salix — Willow

The genus *Salix* is a large one, with a wide geographic distribution, and it includes plants of greatly varying habit, from large trees to prostrate shrublets. All of the species, however, are dioecious; that is, with separate male and female individuals, as in Hollies. The flowers themselves are minute and greatly reduced in structure; the males consisting basically of only stamens, and the females of a single pistil. Each is surrounded at the base by a scale-like structure that is often densely hairy. The flowers are grouped into clusters of a type known as catkins. Those species with silky-hairy flower scales and dense, compact catkins are commonly known as Pussy Willows. These are among the most ornamental of the Willows, and they are among our best-loved harbingers of spring.

A few of the species with the earliest and most ornamental catkins are included in this article. Even with the unusually cold weather this winter, the catkins of most of these were in evidence by the first of March, even though the plants are not yet technically in flower. In all Pussy Willows the male plants are more desirable horticulturally than the females because they are more attractive in bloom. The slender yellow or reddish stamens provide a pleasing contrast with the pearly gray of the rest of the catkin, and they are more conspicuous than the stubby, green pistils of the female flowers.

The male catkins also are often denser and more compact than are the females.

If the plants are pruned back annually and generously fertilized, the new growth will be vigorous, unbranched, and floriferous. This provides good material for indoor arrangements; the branches sold in florist shops are the result of these cultural methods. Vigorous annual pruning also reduces the damage from the boring insects to which many species are so attractive.

The Pussy Willows available in the nursery trade are often hybrids of obscure origin. The following species are prominent in the parentage of many of these hybrids, but they are ornamental in their own right.

Salix caprea, the Goat Willow, a native plant through much of Europe and northeastern Asia, is perhaps the best known species. It responds well to heavy pruning, producing sturdy branches with darkish gray catkins almost 1½ inch long; if not pruned back it will form a bushy tree as much as 25 feet tall. It is quite susceptible to borers.

The Daphne Willow (*Salix daphnoides*) is a native of Central Asia and the Himalayas. It is less well known than the preceding species, but is resistant to borers and considerably more ornamental. As the catkins emerge they are almost white, and contrasted against the red-bronze twigs, they are exquisite. When fully expanded they are about an inch long, soft pearly-gray, and very silky.

Salix gracilistyla is a beautiful Pussy Willow from Japan, Korea, and adjacent China. Unlike the two preceding species, this one is definitely shrubby, seldom growing taller than 10 feet. The pale silvery catkins are different from the preceding in that they are more or less cylindrical in shape; that is, distinctly longer than broad. This is one of the earliest flowering Pussy Willows.

The last "species" to be discussed here is a most distinctive Willow and one that has only recently become commercially available in this country. Its correct name, and its origin, are somewhat of a problem. It has passed as a variety of the preceding species, but it differs from *Salix gracilistyla* in a number of important technical characters, and it has never been found in the wild. It has been in cultivation in Japan for some time, and is perhaps a hybrid. For the time being at least we will call this Willow *Salix melanostachys*.

The most outstanding feature of this plant is its black catkins. Although they are only about ½ inch long, they are abundantly produced, and their color is truly striking, particularly with their brick red anthers which finally turn to yellow as they mature. Only the male form of this shrubby plant has ever been found. Those readers who are members of the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum can look forward to receiving a plant of this outstanding Willow in the spring of 1978 — barring crop failure, of course.

***Lonicera* — Honeysuckle**

Two closely related Chinese species of this large and varied genus, as well as the hybrid between them, are indispensable additions to the winter garden. *Lonicera fragrantissima*, *L. standishii*, and their hybrid *L. × purpusii* (the last having appeared spontaneously in the botanical garden at Darmstadt, Germany), differ primarily in characters of foliage and pubescence. They are nearly equivalent from a horticultural standpoint, so they will be considered collectively here. It must be pointed out, however, that only *L. fragrantissima* is generally available in this country.

The Winter Honeysuckles form more or less erect shrubs with an ultimate height of approximately 6 feet. Their bark is pale brown with a papery texture and a somewhat ragged appearance. They are evergreen in mild climates, but in New England they are completely deciduous. As implied by the Latin name of the commoner species, the flowers of these plants are exceptionally fragrant. The fragrance is distinctive and pleasant, spicy with a hint of lemon.

If the buds are not injured by frosts in the early autumn, or by extreme cold in March, the $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, translucent white flowers with their projecting yellow stamens begin to appear in Boston just as



winter technically ends. In good years the bloom is generous, but the shrubs are never by any means "covered with flowers." The Winter Honeysuckles are excellent for cutting, and branches can be easily forced into bloom as early as January. In the home, close at hand, the delicate flowers with their wonderful fragrance are much more charming than Forsythias could ever be.

Viburnum

The genus *Viburnum* includes a large number of plants of outstanding horticultural value. Many species are ornamental in flower, fruit, and autumn color, so they are exceptionally versatile in the garden. The versatility of the genus is further enhanced by the flowering periods of the various species that span almost the entire year. *Viburnum farreri* (formerly *V. fragrans*) blooms early enough in New England to be included in the winter garden. Here this native of China produces a generous display of intensely fragrant, pink tubular flowers in roundish clusters before the end of March in good years. In milder climates, the flowers appear intermittently during the fall and winter, and not infrequently here at the Arnold Arboretum a few will open just in time to be nipped by the first frost. The foliage appears quite early and remains in good condition during the growing season, taking on a bronzy tint during the summer and finally turning maroon in the fall.

Several variants of the species are in cultivation. *Viburnum farreri* var. *album* has pure white flowers that are slightly larger than those of the typical plant, and they also appear perhaps a week earlier. The cultivar 'Bowles' has deeper pink flowers.

Viburnum × *bodnantense*, a hybrid between this species and the tender *V. grandiflorum*, has been produced several times. A selection from the cross that was made at the famous Bodnant Gardens in Wales has been given the cultivar name 'Dawn'; this is the clone now in general cultivation. This plant is a better garden plant than either of its parents for us in the Northeast. It blooms slightly later and more profusely than *V. farreri*; the flower clusters are looser, and the flowers themselves are deep pink in bud but fading to a blush as they mature.

Rhododendron

March is hardly a month when most New Englanders start to look for Rhododendrons and Azaleas in bloom. However, two closely related species can be counted on to add a splash of color to the drab landscape before the month is out. The color of the blossoms of both species is typically lavender to rose-purple, colors that many people find objectionable in flowers; but at this time of year, who can be choosy?



Viburnum farreri var. *album*. Photo: D. Wyman.

The difference between Rhododendrons and Azaleas is often a point of confusion, and this is not the place to enter into a taxonomic discussion. Both types of plants are generally classified botanically in the genus *Rhododendron*, but as distinct subgenera. The species discussed here are technically Rhododendrons, even though they are usually deciduous and would easily pass as Azaleas to the non-botanist.

Rhododendron dauricum, the Dahurian Rhododendron, is the first of its genus to bloom in New England. The flowers, 1 to 1½ inches across, from clustered buds near the ends of the branches, generally begin to appear during the last week of March. Typically the small leaves are deciduous in the fall, but var. *sempervirens* is partially evergreen even in our climate. This species is horticulturally less desirable than the following, and it is not commonly grown. It is perhaps best known indirectly, since the evergreen variety is one of the parents of the increasingly more popular PJM Hybrids.

The Korean Rhododendron, *Rhododendron mucronulatum*, is a first-class garden plant. It is vigorous, hardy, and floriferous, perhaps the showiest of the early-blooming shrubs. It is completely deciduous, and the flowers usually appear at the very end of March, long before the leaves which might hide their glory. The species, growing as tall as 6 to 8 feet, is widely distributed throughout northeastern Asia, and the flower color is variable both in the wild and in cultivation. Most commonly, the 1½- to 2-inch, widely open blooms are a pale rosy-purple; several darker flowered variants have been named, but they are not yet commonly available. A clear pink-flowered seedling appeared among a population grown by Mr. Henry Skinner at Cornell University in the 1930's; this selection, named 'Cornell Pink', is now widely distributed, offering an attractive alternative for those people who do not like the flower color of the typical plant. A white-flowered variant (forma *albiflorum*) has been found in Korea, but it is not yet widely known in cultivation. Another series of variants recently discovered at high elevations in Korea may eventually lead to the development of dwarf forms of exceptional horticultural merit.

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Rhododendron dauricum. Photo: H. Howard.



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