

THE STORY OF PLANTS: DAPHNE

DANIEL MOUNT

IN 1841 EMERSON wrote, “It is thought a disgrace to love unrequited.” Though unrequited love seems so Victorian in this post-psychological world of online dating, I know this disgrace. For you see I am a lover of daphne, not the virgin nymph pursued by the lusty Apollo and changed into the laurel tree by her father as protection, but the genus of flowering shrubs. Yet daphne has not always been so willing to return that love.

Daphne is the Greek name for bay laurel. How the name transferred to the unrelated fragrant flowered plants in the Thymelaeaceae is rather vague, though some believe the word daphne has an even earlier origin in the Persian word for “odorous.” Of the 70 species in this genus of northern hemisphere shrubs, probably the one that comes to every gardener’s mind first is *Daphne odora* ‘Aureomarginata’. A rather gawky and unreliable shrub, its appealing fragrance, with hints of citrus and carnation, has enticed us all. For this fragrance it has been cultivated in its native China for thousands of years, reaching European gardens at the time Emerson was born. It was treated as a conservatory plant before entering the garden.

Daphne’s long history of cultivation in the West does not begin with this Chinese species though. Early Europeans used *D. gnidium*, *D. mezereum*, and *D. laureola* medicinally, though all parts of the plant are extremely toxic. The seeds of *D. mezereum*, whose specific name means “destroyer of life,” were once



Daphne odora ‘Aureomarginata’
(Daniel Mount)

used as a substitute for pepper because the glycosides they contain cause a burning sensation in the mouth and often death. Well, that’s one way to dispose of that lover who does not requite.

Though toxicity is generally true of the genus little else is. From alpine sub-shrubs like *D. petraea* and sub-alpine shrubs like *D. cneorum* to tall woodlanders like *D. bholua*, from the deciduous *D. genkwa* to the evergreen *D. odora*, there is a wide range of habit in the genus. And not all are fragrant. The invasive *D. laureola* with the ugly common name of spurge laurel is said by many gardeners to be at least night fragrant. My nose has rarely picked up a scent from this evergreen which I religiously edit, allowing it only the driest and shadiest spots in the garden where nothing else will grow. All other daphnes need a very

specific siting to achieve ultimate growth and flowering.

Of the many fine variegated forms, I am particularly fond of the *D. x burkwoodii* cultivars ‘Carol Mackie’, now a garden classic, and the stunner ‘Brigg’s Moonlight’. But all is not variegation either; the deep purple black foliage of *D. x boutteana* ‘Louis van Houtte’ makes a powerful statement when paired with golden leaved plants, and has the tough nature of one parent, *D. laureola*.

Now that I garden in the cold Snoqualmie Valley toughness is a quality I look for in daphnes. I am currently growing *D. x transatlantica* ‘Eternal Fragrance’, which blooms from March to November, and *D. odora* ‘Zuiko Nishiki’. Both planted in a berm for drainage have been under two feet of water twice this winter, and in between floods have experienced temperatures in the single digits for a week. They show little evidence of giving up, and the promise of flowers to come.

Emerson was hopeful, “. . . the great will see that true love cannot be unrequited.” And this gardener who loves daphne has received his returns. 🌱

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