

Mahonia gracilis – the Graceful Mahonia

The graceful Mahonia is native of Mexico and a member of the Berberidaceae family and is a stellar part shade performer in the Mast Arboretum. Our oldest plant is placed in the worst possible site imaginable: a hard-packed, beat-down east Texas red clay right on the very edge of a hot parking lot in full sun. July is miserable in Nacogdoches and summers can be brutally dry. Not only that, the spot is out of reach of the nearest solid-set sprinkler head. When Texans say that the 100+ degree heat is killing us, we mean it. We planted a small one-gallon plant in 1988 as a companion to a strange “shrub oak” from Mexico and then mulched the area heavily with three to four inches of composted pine bark. While the oak is history, the Mahonia has slowly matured into a 3' tall and 4' wide specimen. While not at its best at this writing, it's a survivor. Given a modicum of horticulture, however, this evergreen plant has a lot to offer. In good morning sun, new growth is a glossy and lustrous lime-green. In shade, the plant sports darker foliage with that same glossy nature. Unlike Mahonia, there are no prickly leaf edges or thorny branches to work around. The graceful Mahonia, is smooth and soft to the touch.

On one expedition in the 1980's, one of the most striking plants I encountered in the San Madre Oriental mountain range, western side, and up on a dry slope was a graceful *Mahonia gracilis* in full bloom. In this shady moist canyon, foliage color was amazing - clean and blue - which set up the perfect contrast for a celebration of bright yellow flowers. In the SFA Mast Arboretum, the winter interest is terrific for plants receiving morning and



noon sun, a mixture of reds, oranges, yellows and light green. Plants grown in part-shade tend to be taller and open and fall color less exciting. Full morning sun, mulch, and an occasional irrigation in the worst of droughts is the best recommendation. Late-winter flowers are bright yellow and held on slightly erect racemes emerging from near the terminal buds. We have failed to successfully root a cutting and because of the early-winter blooming nature of the plant, we've failed to make seed. However, the long graceful shoots lend themselves to layering in nearby mulch, and plant numbers can be produced modestly in that manner.

Actually, there are many Mahonias that should be planted in Texas for part shade winter and early spring interest. When planted in mass, few plants make a stronger impression. *Mahonia fortunei* has been dependable, although the 1989 zero degree event killed a few plants and burned many. There are several hybrids worth seeking: *Mahonia X media* cultivars 'Underway', 'Winter Sun', and "Lionel Fortescue" have performed well for years. The hybrid between *Mahonia bealei* and *M. lomariifolia* "Arthur Menzies" is a knockout. *M. bealei* is a commonly used shrub to 6' with strong architectural interest. *M. trifoliata*, a native of Texas and Mexico with sweet edible fruit, has performed well in the dry garden and sports a blue cast to the foliage.

Dr. David Creech, Regents Professor, Professor Emeritus, Director, SFA Mast Arboretum at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas –
dcreech@sfasu.edu