

Osmanthus fragrans – Sweet Olive

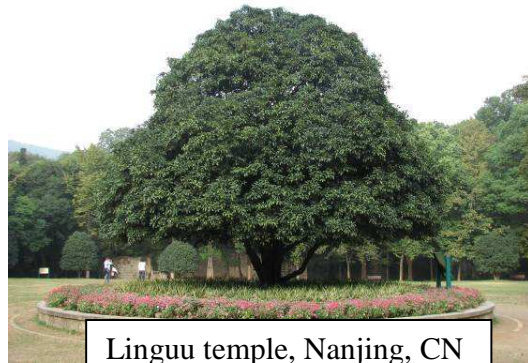
In plant-hunting circles, one of the treasures yet to say hello in southern horticulture is the elusive red-flowered form of sweet olive, *Osmanthus fragrans*. Well, I can now add to the rumors that such a plant exists. In 2004, I was confronted *O. fragrans* ‘Zhusha Dangui’ in a sweet olive garden near Suzhou, China. Yes, the flowers were a bit spent, but red enough to drive me to drooling and fighting the urge to snatch a cutting. I learned that ‘Zhusha Dangui’ is red for only a few days and the flowers quickly fade. I’ve seen the photos in texts, but I have yet to see this variety in bloom right in front of me.

Over the last seven years, I’ve been working in southeastern China on various projects. During one of my visits in 2004, I was invited by scientist Xiang Qibai, an amazing botanist of international reputation, to participate in the first International Sweet Osmanthus conference in Shanghai, China in early October, 2004. There was a catch; I had to deliver a presentation on “The Status and Use of *Osmanthus fragrans* in Southern USA landscapes”. Well, that seemed easy enough

but I thought my knowledge on the subject might be more or less summed up in a minute or two. Fortunately, with the help of my friends across the South, I managed a talk that acquainted our hosts with the plant in the USA, the dozen or so varieties available, its production in the nursery industry, and its use in southern landscapes. Keep in mind that this is one of the ten “traditional flowers of China” and this is a species planted in the millions. Sweet olive is one of the most revered trees across southern China. In fact, during October when the species is at its best, over ten Chinese cities honor the plant with a wide variety of special holidays. In a carnival-like atmosphere, Chinese citizens flock to sweet olive gardens to bask in the fragrance and glory of the plant.



Osmanthus fragrans var. *aurantiacus*



Linguu temple, Nanjing, CN

The conference included one day of talks from international and Chinese lecturers and then, best of all, two days of touring gardens in Suzhou and Hangzhou famous for the species. Native to China and enjoying a wide range, there are many old patriarchs over 1000 years old. China has applied to the International Horticulture Society to be the official International Registry for the genus and this certainly makes sense. After all, China is home to a long history with the plant and harbors most of the world's ancient germplasm of the species. Old trees are revered, signed and interpreted, and given holy attendance. Protective fences mark their importance. Tourists flock to gawk at their size and glory. The most ancient plant known in China rests comfortably in the grounds of the Shengshui Temple, Nanzheng County, Shannxi Province and is over 2100 years old. It's forty feet in height and this



Ancient sweet olive, Suzhou, CN

mystical tree was planted by the Xiaohe himself, the Minister of the Han Dynasty. The most impressive tree that I saw personally was the stately specimen in the landscape of Linggu Temple, Nanjing city, Jiangsu province and this dense-foliaged giant is over 20' tall, sixty inches in circumference and sports a crown diameter of 25'. It rests alone in the valley and when in bloom on a still early morning the entire valley is filled with its magic. I have never caught it right. Flower fragrance in China is much appreciated, and I was told that with some varieties, only two flowers floating in a tea cup were needed to fill a small closed room with fragrance. Ancient sweet olives are revered, often snatched from the onslaught of a construction project, or as a rescue in the forest or roadside. In general, nurserymen transport these monsters with as much of a root ball as possible. It would be considered tiny by American standards. They then plant the tree in a raised bed in nursery rows. The tree is dehorned and wrapped with jute rope. For the first few years the tree is hand watered and a hose is used to "wet" the jute rope frequently. With a small root ball, these giant liners struggle to get into balance – and with a little Chinese care, nearly all survive and become attractive giant specimens. These growers hold plants for ten to twenty years, selling the tree at enormous prices into garden development projects associated with steamy growth in southeastern China.

There are over 157 varieties of sweet olive in China divided into four main groups: *Fragrans*, *Latifolius*, *Thunbergii*, and *Aurantiacus*. It's the latter that's attracted the plant hunter's eye, for it's this group that finds the orange and orange-red flowers. In the last twenty years, an effort has been made to preserve the species in China and select superior cultivars. The official registry of *Osmanthus* rests in China under Xiang Qibai's leadership. Recently, a monograph with color photographs has been published in China that includes all the extraordinary diversity in the genus. Cultivars have been selected for

flower size, characteristics of the flower, abundance of flowers, time of bloom, tree form and habit, bark, branch, leaf, pedicel, and fruit. While touring the sweet olive garden in Suzhou, I encountered an interesting contorted sweet olive and one that was mildly variegated. *Osmanthus fragrans* has been in cultivation in China for over 2000 years, well before it was ever introduced into the west in 1856. The most exciting recent introduction into the USA is 'Fudingzhu', or more popularly known as 'Nanjing Beauty'. It's very floriferous, white flowered, and is known to bloom quickly in the nursery container and over many months. *O. fragrans* var. *aurantiacus* is the orange-flowered form that one can find occasionally in the landscapes of the South and it's a treasure when it reaches peak bloom and fragrance in early fall, one of those smell it before you see it plants.. Dirr lists nine varieties, but there are others and none have taken the trade by storm.

In terms of popularity, sweet olive has a long way to go in the USA. I visited one nursery in southeastern China that produces 1.5 million cutting grown plants per year! While most Chinese nursery plants are destined for the China marketplace, huge in itself, there is growing interest in exporting new cultivars and plants to the international market. For that to happen there will have to be cooperation, marketing and promotion. Until that happens, southern nurserymen and landscapers are encouraged to take a new look at an old friend, the sweet smelling sweet olive.

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