

Plant gems from China[©]

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INTRODUCTION

A lot of plants native in China thrive in landscapes across the USA. Chinese plant germplasm has been continuously introduced to the USA, and used in breeding and selection. So many new cultivars with Chinese genetics have been introduced in the landscape plant market. The Chinese love plants and particularly enjoy 10 “traditionally famous flowers”: lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), sweet olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*), peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*), azalea (*Azalea* spp.), chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum* spp.), mei flower (*Prunus mume*), daffodil (*Narcissus* spp.), rose (*Rosa* spp.), camellia (*Camellia* spp.) and cymbidium (*Cymbidium* spp.). Public and university breeders have focused on these taxa. In addition, many species and cultivars commonly grown in China may be of interest to growers and landscape professionals in the USA, which this manuscript will be focused on.

PLANT SPECIES AND CULTIVARS

Sweet olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*)

There are mainly four types of sweet olives, Auranticus Group, Luteus Group, Albus Group, orange and Semperflorens Group. Ever-blooming sweet olives have peak blooming in the fall like the others, and continue for about 6 months although not as profusely. Recently there are three variegated cultivars: ‘Yinbian Caiye’ with white leaf margins on mature leaves and red, white, and green on new growth, ‘Yintian Cai’ with red-margined maroon leaves maturing to white-margined green leaves, and ‘Pearl Color’ with pink new growth.

Camellia (*Camellia azalea*)

The exciting development in camellia breeding has mainly involved *Camellia azalea* (Synonym: *C. changii*), an unusual evergreen species with leaves and flowers similar to azaleas. It flowers from summer to fall and has the potential to flower year around under optimal growing conditions. Palm Landscape Co. in Guangdong Province, China has released 15 cultivars, six in ‘Xiari’/‘Summer’ (‘Fenqun’, ‘Fendai’, ‘Qixin’, ‘Guanghui’, ‘Guangchang’, and ‘Hongrong’), seven in ‘Xiameng’/‘Summer Dream’ (‘Wenqing’, ‘Kejuan’, ‘Hualin’, ‘Yanping’, ‘Xiaoxuan’, ‘Chunling’ and ‘Yulan’) series, ‘Xiayong Guose’, and ‘Xiafeng Relang’.

Mei flower (*Prunus mume*)

Mei flower made its way to the top two (the other one being peony) finalists to be considered as the national flower. Many cultivars grow in the Yangzi River and Yellow River areas (USDA Zone 6-8). It’s probably the earliest flowering *Prunus* in early spring. Numerous filaments add to the beauty of delicate flowers. Its bright green young stems make very nice contrast against white, pink, and red flowers. Some white cultivars include ‘Xiao Lve’ (small earliest flowering cultivars with green sepals; white flowers and filaments), ‘Wan Fu Tiao’ (late flowering, multiflora, young stems and flowers of different colors, and variegated flowers), ‘Fanxing Gongfen’ (pinkish white) and ‘Shangbi Chuizhi’ (white flower on pendulous stems), and pink and red cultivars ‘Dongfang Zhusha’ (bright red), ‘Fanhua Zhusha’ (red sepals; pink petals), ‘Yinxu Zhusha’ (white filaments; pink petals) and ‘Taige Zhusha’ (pink).

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Taiwan cherry (*Prunus campanulata*)

This is probably the best cherry for warm climate (>Zone 8) with cultivar colors range from white to red.

Winter sweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*)

Winter sweet is called “la (December on lunar calendar) mei (*P. mume*)” in Chinese, and flowers start earlier than mei flower. It is one of China’s favorite plants because not many species flower right around the most important Chinese holiday: the Spring Festival (aka Chinese New Year). Depending on the weather, plants could continuously flower into March or even April in some Zone 6 areas. The waxy flowers have very long postharvest life, and thus also serve as a popular woody cut stem. There are 19 registered cultivars. Petals range from whitish translucent to bright yellow and inner sepals range from whitish translucent to dark maroon. Common cultivars are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Flower characteristics, sepal color and flowering time of common winter sweet cultivars in China.

| Name | Flower characteristics | Inner sepal color | Outer sepal color | Flowering time ¹ |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Bao Chun | Urn | Maroon hue | Light yellow | Late-Dec. – mid-Feb. |
| Caotang Yunxiang | Bowl | Maroon | Light yellow | Early-Nov – late-Jan. |
| Huang Qing | Urn, bell, large | Yellow with purplish red | Light yellow | Early-Dec. – early-Feb. |
| Hua Hudie | Bell, fragrant | Yellow with red | Golden | Dec. – Jan. |
| Huantian Xidi | Bowl to plate, densely, apex reflex | Yellow | Light yellow | Mid-Dec. – early-Feb. |
| Jinling Hongzhuang | Open, sepals pointed, fragrant | Purplish red | Golden | Late-Dec. – mid-Feb. |
| Jinse Yangguang | Bowl | Golden | Golden | Dec. – Jan. |
| Lv Yun | Open, sepals pointed | Light yellow | Light yellow | Jan. – Feb. |
| Qianyun Jindie | Open, Long sepals | Yellow | Yellow | Late-Dec. – Feb. |
| Si Nian | Bell, apex reflex | Light maroon | Light yellow | Early-Dec. – mid-Feb. |
| Wai Gang | Open like lotus | Light yellow | Light yellow | Late-Nov – Jan. |
| Xiaran Qianyu | Bell, densely | Reddish white | Creamy | Early-Jan. – late-Feb. |
| Xiang Yi | Ball, Sepals incurvate | Yellow with red | Yellow | Mid-Dec. – late-Jan. |
| Xingfu Huaxiang | Open, apex reflex, large, fragrant | Yellow with purplish red | Yellow | early-Dec. – early-Feb. |
| Xingguang Canlan | Bowl | Golden | Golden | Dec. – Jan. |
| Yangzhou Huang | Open bowl, apex reflex | Golden | Golden | Jan. – Feb. |
| Yingbei Hanzhu | Urn, Sepals incurvate | Whitish yellow with red | Whitish Yellow | Jan. – Feb. |
| Zhongshan Bai | Open, large | Yellowish white | White | Late-Dec. – late-Feb. |
| Zao Hong | Urn, Sepals incurvate | Reddish | Yellow | Mid-Nov. – late-Jan. |

¹Flowering time is based on observations in Yangtze River area.

Chinese tulip poplar (*Liriodendron chinense*)

The main difference between Chinese and American tulip poplar (*L. tulipifera*) is the leaf shape (deeper lobes for Chinese) and leaf pubescence (absent in Chinese). It has a gorgeous fall color.

Shaanxi euonymus (*Euonymus schensianus* ‘Jinsi Diao Hudie’)

‘Jinsi Diao Hudie’ (butterfly on golden thread) has long (>20 cm) stems where red fruits with four wide and obtuse wings hang from. Red seeds are exposed when mature, increasing the ornamental value.

Japanese pagoda tree (*Styphnolobium japonicum*)

Styphnolobium japonicum f. *oligophylla* has 1-2 palmate leaves at the end of petiole. 'Pendula' ('Dragon Claw' in Chinese) is often grafted and looks like green parasol. Its winter appearance (branching structure) after leaves fall is very attractive too. 'Golden Stem' has golden leaves in the spring and fall, and golden new growth and chartreuse foliage in summer. In winter young and two-year-old twigs are both golden color.

Fragrant black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Idaho')

Similar to the species, it has pink clusters of flowers and is more fragrant.

Golden elm (*Ulmus pumila* 'Jinye')

'Jinye' (golden leaf in Chinese) has golden leaves in the spring and fall and golden new growth and chartreuse foliage in summer. It is very vigorous and tolerates heavy pruning.

Taiwanese rain tree (*Koelreuteria elegans*)

This Taiwan native is a popular broadleaf evergreen landscape tree with clusters of golden yellow flowers in the summer and rose colored fruit capsules in the fall.

Sloanea sinensis

Called "monkey tree", as the round fruits' color resembles monkeys, *Sloanea* has delicate white flowers in summer and fall.

***Euscaphis japonica* (syn. *Euscaphis konishii*)**

From South China, this plant does not get noticed until the fruits turn red - starting September and mature to open up to show black seeds inside through March.

Formosan gum (*Liquidambar formosana*)

The gum balls are softer and less woody, and thus less a pedestrian hazard, than the U.S. species. It has great fall color, too.

Yunnan maple [*Acer coriaceifolium* (syn. *A. cinnamomifolium*)]

Yunnan maple is evergreen in warm climate and has bright red samaras.

Soapnut tree (*Sapindus mukorossi*)

Soapnut tree is a big landscape tree and great for fall color in a warm climate.

Wilson's dogwood [*Cornus wilsoniana* (*Swida wilsoniana*)]

If profuse white terminal flowers are not attractive enough to some. However, the bark is a magnificent mottled and exfoliating combination of green, gray, white and reddish brown.

Fragrant rosewood (*Dalbergia odorifera*)

The wood is very fragrant and demands a high price for the furniture market. Big leaves are alternate and imparipinnate. Numerous small axillary flowers turn to samaroid fruits.

Chinese yew (*Taxus chinensis*)

The red fruits when mature brightens the landscape.

Cyclocarya paliurus

Its leaves are alternate and pinnate. The most interesting about this tree is the axillary fruiting spikes with green nutlets and greenish white leathery disc wings about 3-6 cm, which resemble big round elm samaras.

'Yang mei' (*Myrica rubra*)

Although in the same genus as *M. cerifera*, 'Yang mei' is a large broadleaf evergreen dioecious tree producing red strawberry-like edible fruits in summer.