Daphniphyllum macropodum:

A STEALTHY STUNNER

Text and photos by Janine Anderson

Have you ever strolled along a path in the Arboretum, reveling in the birdsong and the lushness of the flora, and then been dumbstruck by a plant you'd never noticed before? I've had that experience on numerous occasions—and, in truth, on numerous occasions it's happened with a plant I've been struck dumb by before, then forgotten about.

Let me introduce you to *Daphniphyllum macropodum*, a showstopper if ever there were one. You may have seen—and been dazzled by—it before, without realizing it: Five of these large, evergreen beauties flank a trail at the base of the New Zealand Forest in the Pacific Connections Garden. Indeed, the creation of the new forest garden has rescued these specimens from relative obscurity, making them more accessible for visitors to enjoy.

ABOVE: The late-season fruits of *Daphniphyllum macropodum* combine to beautiful effect with the plant's distinctive, evergreen foliage.

Key Features

Daphniphyllum macropodum is a shrub or small tree native to China, Japan and Korea. With a genus name like that, you might expect it to be in the same family as *Daphne* (Thymelaeaceae), but the plant is actually one of more than 20 species of *Daphyniphyllum* in the family Daphniphyllaceae. All 20 are evergreen and native to the same regions in Asia. The leaves of *Daphniphyllum* do resemble those of daphne, hence the genus name, which roughly translates into "daphne leaves." Common names for *Daphniphyllum macropodum* include false daphne and, in the South, redneck rhododendron—though I don't think either name, particularly the latter, does justice to this fine plant.

The plant's narrow leaves can reach 10 inches long and three inches wide and are arranged at the branch tips in tight, whorl-like spirals. The dark-green leaves have beautiful reddish-pink petioles (leaf stalks) and midribs. In early summer, clusters of small, green or creamy-white flowers emerge from the leaf axils and develop into purplish fruits. The blueberry-like fruits ripen by fall and persist on the plant into winter. Although the flowers and fruit have been described as being inconspicuous, I think the fruits, when paired with the leaves, are stunning.

Complicating Factors

Daphniphyllum macropodum is dioecious, which accounts for some of its charm and mystery, but can also be a source of frustration for gardeners. Male and female flowers are borne on different plants, so there will be no fruit (or seeds) unless both sexes are present, and then only the female plant will bear fruit. To increase the likelihood of fruit set, it is recommended that five or more individuals be planted in close proximity, as we find in the Arboretum. Given that one shrub can reach 20 by 20 feet, five plants could cover half a city lot, and not many gardeners have that kind of real estate. The plants in the Arboretum, which date back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, are taller than they are wide (possibly because they have had limited room to spread out), so perhaps only a quarter of a city lot would be needed to contain these five plants.

What More Is There to Know?

In China, the timber of *Daphniphyllum macropodum* is used in furniture making, but both there and here the plant is grown primarily for the ornamental value of its foliage—and possibly for the thrill of it being so little known, at least here in the Pacific Northwest. (It is somewhat more common in the southern United States.)

Emerging leaves in spring point up and tend to have grayish tones, while older leaves point down

Another Common Name: Yuzuri-ha

In its native Japan, *Daphniphyllum macropodum* is called *Yuzuri-ha*, a short name heavy with symbolism. It translates to "deferring leaf." According to Dr. David Creech of the SFA Mast Arboretum, in Nacogdoches, Texas, the phrase refers to the old leaf being replaced by a new leaf in the succeeding season, with no interruption of foliage. He says it also refers to the new leaves giving thanks to the old leaves for their kind nourishment during the winter. In Japan, *Yuzuri-ha* is used as an "ornament for the new year to celebrate the good relationship of old and new generations."

and are dark green. Unlike with evergreen rhododendrons, the foliage doesn't curl in cold weather. The plant is hardy in USDA Zones 7 and 8 (which includes the maritime Northwest), though it might be hardy down to Zone 6, with protection, and up to Zone 9. Young branches are red, and then turn brown with age. The trunks are grayish brown and are always single. The plant's growth rate is slow when young, and then speeds up to a moderate pace as it ages and becomes larger.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about *Daphniphyllum macropodum* is that it is an easy plant to grow in the right circumstances. Similar to many rhododendrons, *D. macropodum* is a woodland shrub and, as such, prefers moist, humus-rich, well-drained soil. Though some sources state the plant does well in full sun, I would err on the side of more shade and less sun. The specimens in the Arboretum looked fabulous in deep shade and still look great after having been partially daylighted with the development of the New Zealand Forest. I've seen yellowed foliage on nursery stock sitting in exposed sites, and given the plant's foliage is its most-prized feature, maintaining its lusciousness is paramount. To top it all off, *Daphniphyllum macropodum* is reputed to be deer-resistant.

Where Can I Find It?

When you visit a nursery, I recommend asking for *Daphniphyllum macropodum* by its scientific name rather than the common names. You might encounter some blank stares, but it's unlikely you'll go home with the wrong plant. I have seen *Daphniphyllum macropodum* offered for sale in at least one area nursery (including Wells Medina Nursery), and in the catalogs of several specialty nurseries in Western Washington and Oregon (such as Keeping It Green Nursery, Far Reaches Farm and Cistus Nursery).

I would caution against buying *Daphniphyllum macropodum* sight unseen (for example, by mail-order through a catalog), at least not without a promise that the specimen being sold exhibits the show-stopping, deep-pink petioles. Apparently, this feature—the plant's main gush factor—is not universal. Also, you should plan to appreciate *Daphniphyllum macropodum* for the beauty of its form and foliage alone, as there will be no fruit unless you are willing and able to create a small grove.

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