



Japanese Sweet Shrub: *Clethra barbinervis*

BY NIALL DUNNE

HIDDEN TREASURE OF THE ARBORETUM

I first encountered *Clethra* about 20 years ago, while working at Brooklyn Botanic Garden in New York. It was a sunny, summer day, and I was strolling around BBG's colorful and expansive rock garden. Just as I was exiting the garden, I was brought to a halt by the sight—and intoxicating perfume—of a medium-sized shrub in bloom along the path. It turned out to be sweet pepperbush, *Clethra alnifolia*, a deciduous plant native to the eastern U.S. The shrub was covered in long, narrow, upright spires of tiny, white flowers, and these were swarming with bees of all shapes and sizes. I was captivated, and the sweet pepper bush became a

favorite of mine to re-visit over the eight years I spent at that garden.

When I started working at Washington Park Arboretum in 2007, the first *Clethra* I noticed was an impressive shrub cluster at the path intersection immediately as you walk over the Wilcox Bridge, heading west toward the Montlake neighborhood. It was late July, and the seven-foot-tall plants (now about eight feet tall) were blooming beautifully—and fragrantly. The plant tags read *C. barbinervis*, the Japanese sweet shrub, and the accession date for all three was 1979. They looked similar to sweet pepper bush, but the flower spikes were drooping (rather than



upright), the foliage seemed somewhat smaller, and the bark was exfoliating, revealing interesting patterns of brown and gray.

I've since encountered several other species of *Clethra* around the Arboretum, including *C. alnifolia*, *C. fargesii* and *C. acuminata*. And UW Botanic Gardens curator Ray Larson says that there have been recent additions of *C. delavayi* and *C. kaipoensis* to the collection. (The genus comprises about 80 species, native mainly to East Asia and the Americas.) But *C. barbinervis* is easily the most abundant of the bunch here, making up over half the 30 or so specimens.

Specimens of Japanese sweet shrub also comprise the oldest of the *Clethra* in the Arboretum collection. A grouping of about 10 plants on the lower Lookout Trail—just north of where it intersects with the path that connects the new Centennial Garden to Rhododendron Glen—dates to 1945. These were originally received as seed from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and were planted out in 1950. They are upwards of 20 feet high now. At first, the plants were misidentified as *C. monstachya* (syn. *C. delavayi*); but in 1963, then-director Brian Mulligan confirmed them as *C. barbinervis*, based on their floral characteristics.

Another cluster of interest is located just to the south of the Asiatic Maple Collection, along



the upper Lookout Trail on the west side of the Magnolia Collection. This group of four specimens—about 12 feet high—was received as seed in 1953 and planted out in 1959. The records indicate that the seeds were provided by noted UW botany professor Charles Leo Hitchcock, who collected them in Japan.

Clethra barbinervis is an upright, deciduous shrub native to open mountain forests of southern China, Japan and Korea. It typically grows between 10 and 20 feet tall and about half as wide. It produces two- to four-inch, somewhat glossy, dark-green, pointed, oval-shaped leaves with serrated edges. I haven't gone to see its fall foliage, but I've read it's good. (The leaves turn bright yellow, sometimes red.) The plant does best in partial shade and consistently moist, acidic soils.

If you'd like a mid-summer flower fix, be sure to come to the Arboretum. Check out what's in bloom in the summer-themed Centennial Garden, then on your way to see the hydrangeas in Rhody Glen, stop by the Japanese sweet bush for a very satisfying sniff. You'll see other *Clethra* flowering in that main cluster, too—and probably lots of happy bees. 🍯

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TOP LEFT: The fragrant flower spikes appear in late July. **RIGHT:** Colorful peeling bark on a mature specimen.