

The Mexican mock oranges

JACK ALDRIDGE has surveyed some less familiar *Philadelphus* in cultivation and reports on the results.

Philadelphus are a mainstay genus in the summer shrub garden, where they are relied upon for an outstanding performance in June, along with their indifference to poor soils and, in many cases, exquisite fragrance. Like many shrubs, they have somewhat fallen out of favour, although a few of Lemoine's popular nineteenth-century hybrids are still widely grown. There are around 80 species in all, occurring throughout the Northern Hemisphere, of which a representative cross section of both North American and Asiatic species can be found in gardens and collections. Until only recently, this left a notable omission largely unaccounted for, the Mexican species. Having been poorly represented for many years, a number of these beautiful plants have now begun to make an appearance.

Overview

The Mexican species are a diverse assembly, with highly variable regional climate zones across which they occur accounting for much of their morphological variation. Those found in more arid parts of primarily northeast Mexico are often low-growing, twiggy small-leaved shrubs, while those growing further south in higher rainfall areas are tree-climbing vines, which remain almost entirely evergreen and grow the year round.

There are around 20 species that occur in Mexico, as included in the authoritative monograph by Hu (1954). Of these, at least nine have been introduced to cultivation in the UK since 1990, grouped here under headings of the taxonomic group or section to which they belong:

- Microphyllus group Section *Microphyllus*
- Coulteri group Section *Coulterianus*
- Mexicanus group Section *Poecilostigma*

Recent introductions have arisen from the collecting efforts of groups and individuals. Of these, John Fairey & Carl Schoenfeld of Peckerwood, Texas have been greatly influential in introducing a wide variety of Mexican plants to American gardens through their Yucca Do Nursery, which at one time listed nearly 20 separate collections of *Philadelphus*. As a subscriber to Fairey & Schoenfeld's trips into Mexico, Maurice Foster received seed from a number of these, thus introducing several species to the UK for the first time.

With only five included in the most recent *Hillier Manual* and much confusion surrounding the names of those now in cultivation, the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of those introduced in the last 30 years, with discussion on their performance in gardens so far.



Left, exceptionally fragrant *Philadelphus maculatus* 'Sweet Clare' cascading over a low wall at RHS Garden Wisley.

Opposite, bottom left, *Philadelphus maculatus* 'Mexican Jewel' with the species' characteristic dark 'eye'.

Opposite, bottom right, the true *Philadelphus madrensis* F&M 326 from Durango State, northwest Mexico.

Microphyllus group

Of all the Mexican species introduced in recent years, none has made more of an impression on horticulture than *Philadelphus maculatus*. Above all, it is powerfully fragrant, eclipsing that of any other species. It is one of a complex of at least six species or subspecies found in more arid parts of northern Mexico, closely related to *P. microphyllus*. Found growing on steep limestone slopes, it is typical of this group of xerophytic shrubs, forming an elegantly arching plant to perhaps 1.5 m, clothed in tiny, narrow grey leaves on pendent branches. Its flowers are small and variable in shape, but make up for what they lack in size in their profusion. Besides their unsurpassable bubblegum scent, a characteristic feature is the maroon-pink stain at the base of the petals, which give the flower an attractive dark eye.

Several collections of this wonderful species from the Sierra Madre Oriental made by John Fairey & Carl Schoenfeld around 1990 are in cultivation, on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1992, Maurice Foster received seed from one of these collections, from which a number of plants were raised, the best form was given the clonal name 'Sweet Clare', for his daughter. He recalls taking a large vase of cut stems to exhibit at a Woody Plant Committee meeting at the RHS Halls in Vincent Square, London, where it was awarded a First Class Certificate. The strong perfume carried itself through the building; although the meeting took place upstairs, the scent was easily picked up by those on the ground floor. Since popularised and distributed by Hillier Nurseries, it is now widely available. At RHS Garden Wisley, several have been planted together to great effect at the top of a low wall, where they cascade over, flooding the area with fragrance in June.



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Another introduction around the same time was made by Compton, d'Arcy & Rix (CDR 1226), who collected it on the border between the states of Coahuila and Nuevo Leon in 1991. From this collection, 'Mexican Jewel' was selected and named by Martyn Rix. It differs little from the above, with the same unrivalled fragrance, except perhaps with a more open, sprawling habit. 'Scented Storm' is a sister seeding. Typical of the confusion that surrounds this species, it has been mixed up with *P. mexicanus* in the past; a mistake that has been repeated both ways. It is also confused with *P. madrensis*, the name under which CDR 1226 was introduced, before later being corrected (Rix, 2003). As a result, most plants with this name attached will be *P. maculatus*.

Although much rarer, the genuine *Philadelphus madrensis* is now in cultivation, from one collection by Mark Fillan & Nick Macer (F&M 326) in 2006. It was collected near Durango in the Sierra Madre Occidental, close to the type locality. Unlike the prior introductions, this agrees well with Hemsley's description of the species, having apiculate leaves, smaller flowers with a densely tomentose calyx (Hemsley, 1908). Thick silver pubescence on the undersides of the leaves is another distinguishing feature. It has made a more compact shrub to around 1 m, with the flowers pure white, lacking any pink staining to the petals. In terms of scent, it is sweet but more subtle than *Philadelphus maculatus*.

A distinct character among this group is *Philadelphus palmeri*, another that has made a dwarf shrub to 1 m, with small more rounded leaves. It is exceptional for its large flowers in comparison to the overall size of the bush, with rounder petals and a very prominent central boss of golden yellow



Above, left, *Philadelphus palmeri* has proven itself as a superb small-growing species for a sheltered position. Right, the large square flowers of *Philadelphus sargentianus*, with an attractive fimbriate margin.

56

stamens. They make for a very attractive effect, borne in great profusion on short side-shoots along the arching stems, which flower from end to end in optimum conditions. It is another represented by plants from a Fairey & Schoenfeld collection near La Encantada, Nuevo León, raised by Maurice Foster as an unknown species. Staff at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew later provided the identification. It is worth noting that in mild winters plants might be described as evergreen. In Kent, however, the original plant growing in an exposed location, eventually succumbed to severe cold in 2009 (M. Foster pers. comm.). It is best grown with more shelter than *P. maculatus* requires, which is of tougher constitution.

Coulteri group

A star among the recent introductions has been *Philadelphus aff. sargentianus*, as recently identified by Chris Sanders from another Yucca Do collection, received by Maurice Foster as an unidentified species. He successfully raised three seedlings, which each differ slightly from one another. All flower very freely, producing large square flowers, with overlapping petals and an attractive fimbriate margin, arranged in panicles. A key identification feature is the villose hairs on the lower leaf surfaces and branchlets. Like its other close relatives, it has made a large scandent shrub to nearly 2 m, with arching stems

Right, plants in circulation as *Philadelphus coulteri* perhaps better identify as *P. pringlei*.

Bottom, dense silver indumentum is a distinctive feature of *Philadelphus pringlei*, photographed here at Hilliers where it is labelled *P. calcicola*.



looking to a host for support. None of the three specimens have shown cold damage after more than ten years outside in Kent.

One species that has now correctly been introduced after a couple of false starts is *Philadelphus coulteri*.

Although for many years 'Rose Syringa' (see below) was known incorrectly under this name, the true species was collected by Mark Fillan from the type locality, in Zimapan, Hidalgo State. With smaller, pure white flowers, more slender foliage and a less vigorous nature, it has proven itself to be a very different creature, although not yet widely in cultivation.

Plants in more recent circulation as *P. coulteri*, including those labelled as such at Kew, may in fact be *Philadelphus pringlei*. Originally from a Fairey & Schoenfeld collection, they agree with comments that distinguish it based on its dense intensely silver indumentum, pale green leaves and large, flat flowers comprised of very round overlapping petals (Rix, 2003). It is reportedly an abundant species in northeast Mexico, which concurs with where it was collected. A plant labelled *P. calcicola* in the scree beds in front of Jermyns House at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Hampshire is almost certainly the same species, on the same grounds, although possibly represents a different collection.

Plants that *do* better fit the description of *Philadelphus calcicola* are also in cultivation, however, from another Fillan & Macer introduction (F&M 315), collected southwest Tamaulipas State, on the Sierra Madre Oriental, in 2006.

Mexicanus group

This complex represents the most vigorous of all the 'climbing' Mexican species. Among them, an exciting recent addition has been *Philadelphus*



57



A single five-flowered inflorescence from *Philadelphus karwinskianus* F&M 152.

karwinskianus, which might be described as the genus' answer to a rambling rose!

Plants from a Fillan & Macer collection in Puebla State (F&M 152) have proven to be energetic, scrambling about through nearby hosts by means of powerful, scandent stems, from which it bears elongated panicles of large white scented flowers on pendant side shoots. Based on its provenance, a sheltered position is recommended, although it would probably resprout from the base if cut back by a severe winter.

A plant in Maurice Foster's garden raised from seed collected by Bob Cherry has climbed a large ash to a height of nearly six metres. Although received as *Philadelphus karwinskianus*, it may be another

species as the flowers are smaller and, according to Hu's description, the sepals should only be 5–8 mm long and densely lanate, neither of which are the case (C. Sanders pers. comm. to M. Foster).

Philadelphus affinis is also in cultivation and has recently been made available, from Mark Fillan's collection northwest of Xalapa in 2004. He notes it to differ from the closely related *P. mexicanus* in having 3–5 flowers per inflorescence, as opposed to a solitary inflorescence. Like the majority of this group, it is best described as semi-evergreen, in all but the coldest of winters. Nick Macer (pers. comm.) notes some early confusion between this species and *P. karwinskianus*. Whether indeed they are the same, a further comparison of the three plants described here would be a useful exercise in establishing a proper identification.

Also included for interest is a collection from Guatemala by Bleddyn & Sue Wynn-Jones (BSWJ 10436), from the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, which they have identified as *Philadelphus myrtoides*.

In principle, this is perhaps the most exciting development in the genus to date, given that they were presented with a plant that carried bright yellow flowers, looking more like a *Hypericum* than a *Philadelphus*! Alas, plants raised from this collection have unfortunately only borne white flowers in cultivation (B. Wynn-Jones pers. comm.), which is probably due to insufficient heat or light at flowering time.

The *Rosa Syringa* question

As already mentioned, one species in Section *Poecilostigma* known to cultivation for longer than most has been *Philadelphus mexicanus*, although typically seen in the form of 'Rose Syringa'. Like the others it makes a climber capable of reaching lofty heights. Its large, cupped flowers bear a distinctive maroon-red central blotch, opening white before maturing to cream; although not as intense as the above, with warmth or good light it can make a convincing pale yellow (N. Macer pers. comm.). It is regarded as more tender, usually recommended for a favoured warm wall. Probably introduced more than a century ago, a full account of its confused past can be found under *P. coulteri* Wats. in Bean (1976).

It is difficult to determine the true identity of this historically significant clone, in terms of its relation to *P. mexicanus*. It is worth noting, though, that progeny of more recent introductions of *P. mexicanus* have borne flowers without a blotch. One explanation for this is that the clone may represent a hybrid, perhaps involving *P. maculatus* on account of this distinctive feature. This could be the reason for a similar lack of colouration seen in seedlings raised from 'Rose Syringa' growing in isolation, which are identical to the parent in all other characters. Hybrid or not, *Philadelphus* have been cultivated in Mexico for centuries, with 'Rose Syringa' as we know it not uncommon in gardens there (M. Fillan pers. comm.). Double-flowered *P. mexicanus* have also been recorded and are not unlikely to occur in cultivation. With a more thorough investigation needed, it is perhaps left to a future article.

Future potential

This has only been a cursory and by no means comprehensive discussion but intended to provide some clarity surrounding identification; although much work needs to be done to sort them out taxonomically, it has hopefully highlighted the diversity of the Mexican species. Hiding among the taxonomic confusion are some exciting garden plants, which undoubtedly expand the scope of the genus in gardens as we know it. But more than that, their unrivalled fragrance or variation in form or flower colour not seen before poses exciting opportunities for some imaginative hybridisation that may once again bring *Philadelphus* to the fore.

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