Worthy Plants for Remembering Worthy Friends

How often have you looked at a plant and the memory of a friend suddenly comes to mind? Most likely, it is the person who gifted you the plant, first told you about its virtues or perhaps even disliked the plant! In a similar vein, many plants have botanical or common names that pay tribute to an honorable friend or perhaps a 'botanical dignitary'. Such is the tale of *Amsonia tabernaemontana*, commonly known as Eastern Bluestar. It is a beautiful plant known for lighting up the garden for weeks on end with its brilliant fall color and spring blooms. Far less obvious is how the genus name honors a friendship that for years remained a clouded mystery.

Amsonia is a member of the Apocynaceae or Dogbane Family, so named because some members were sadly used to harm dogs. *Amsonia* has roughly 20 species, mostly all native to North America, although one species is found in Eastern Asia and another in the Eastern Mediterranean. Pictured below in mid-May with Palibin Lilac (*Syringa meyeri* 'Palibin'), Eastern Bluestar is native from Maryland south to Florida and west to Illinois and Texas.

Although the genus was not officially named and described until 1788, the name first appeared in correspondence from the American botanist, John Clayton (1694-1773) in the early 1750's. Clayton was a court clerk in Gloucester County Virginia and spent much of his spare time botanizing throughout the region. He initially thought this plant was a species of *Nerium* or Oleander, also a member of the Dogbane Family. However, during subsequent correspondence, often with the English gardener Peter Collinson (1694-1768) he altered the name to *Amsonia*, although he failed to mention the inspiration for this new name, sparking much hearsay over time. Collinson was friends with numerous horticulturists, including the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and the head gardener of the Chelsea Physic Garden, Philip Miller (1691-1771). These connections helped spread the word about this great new plant found in the colonies.

However, who was Amson? For many years it was thought the genus referred to a rather mysterious Charles Amson. He was thought to be a bit of a wonderer and possibly a Physician who is still credited as the plant's namesake by many authorities. James S. Pringle (History and Eponymy of the Genus Name *Amsonia*, 2004) finally resolved that Charles Amson was not the namesake and may in fact have never existed! However, Pringle does describe a friend of Clayton named Dr. John Amson, who served as alderman or mayor of Williamsburg from 1750-1751 and was a well-respected Physician. His fame as a fine physician travelled far and even reached then 'Colonel' George Washington who had been ailing for some time. Washington traveled from Mt. Vernon to Williamsburg to seek Amson's medical counsel on March 15, 1758. Evidently, he received sound advice as Washington was back to work by April 5th. Just imagine how history could have been rewritten if Amson had misdiagnosed Washington's ailments!

Thanks to Clayton's correspondence and exchange of seed with Collinson, Linnaeus was able to see sketches of plants growing in Collinson's Garden and from those sketches and numerous descriptions named it *Tabernaemontana amsonia* in 1762. *Tabernaemontana* is currently a group of tropical plants, once again in the Dogbane family that honors Jacobus Theodorus (1525-1590) who is often considered as the 'Father' of German botany. He was born in the German town of Bergzabern. Centuries earlier during the Roman occupation of the region, the town was known under the Medieval Latin name of Tabernae Montanae, which translates to 'Taverns in the Mountains'. Theodorus merged the two words, and adopted Tabernaemontanus as his nickname, often going by the name of Jacobus Theodorus Tabernaemontanus. The genus name of *Tabernaemontana* was originally crafted by the French botanist Charles Plumier (1646-1704) as a tribute to Theodorus and Linnaeus formally adopted the genus name in 1753. Fortunately, in 1788 the American botanist Thomas Walter (1740-1789) realized the plant was erroneously classified under this genus. In his book *Flora Caroliniana,* he described and renamed the plant as *Amsonia tabernaemontana*. Thus, a plant that had absolutely no connection with Europe or Jacobus Theodorus Tabernaemontanus, ended up with his moniker as a species epithet. In addition, Dr. Amson and his friendship with Clayton was finally honored with a group of truly beautiful plants!

To start the spring season, Eastern Bluestar first appears in late March or early April, depending upon the duration of winter's chill. Masses of stout, light green stems appear from the crown, initially of unequal lengths and clothed with whirls of willow-like foliage. The stems rapidly elongate into a neat, almost shrub like plant reaching 24-30" tall and wide by early to mid-May. The alternately arranged leaves can expand to lengths of 6" and widths of 2", although 4" by 1" is more the norm. The variety *salicifolia* has more slender or willow-like foliage, reaching 3" long by 1" wide. As the stems approach 2' tall by mid-April, clusters of medium to light blue flower buds appear at the tips of the stems. The flowers appear on pyramidal or flat-topped structures known botanically as cymes (pictured above right), whereby a central stem supports numerous outwardly oriented floral stems. As the five petals expand from the stubby green calyces of the bud (pictured above), they resemble a bird's beak with the lower third of the petals fused and relatively swollen while the remaining portion near the tip comes to a sharp point. Near the tip

of the bud the petals appear in a twisted configuration, with small silvery hairs emerging from between the petals.

When fully open, the flowers measure roughly ¾" across (as seen at left) although collectively, the size of the floral cyme reaches upwards of 6" in diameter by 4" tall! The five petals are light blue to nearly white in color, depending upon the plant and fade to a light yellow or off-white near the base. The flowers have a star-like appearance with each petal coming to a sharp point at the tip, providing the inspiration for the common name of Blue Star. The lower fused portion of the petals forms a tube that is densely lined with inwardly oriented silvery hairs that can be seen at the center of the flowers above. Hidden within these hairs is a central female stigma and 5 male anthers. The job of the hairs is suspected to be for keeping ants or other pollen and nectar thieves from reaching within the corolla tube. The hairs also may facilitate removal of pollen from insects that have visited other flowers and aid in transferring it to the stigma for pollination!

Following bloom, the plant produces a secondary flush of growth, allowing the plants to stretch to the mature size of 3-4' tall and equally as wide. Each flower yields two 4-5" long bean-like seed pods, typical to the Dogbane Family (pictured at right on *Amsonia hubrichtii*), with the entire floral cyme potentially yielding numerous pods. They are mostly hidden by the flush of new growth following flowering. The seed pods are technically called follicles and transition from green to brown in September when a suture along one side splits open, releasing the 8-10 seeds.

In sun, the plants yield an attractive rounded shape and little to no pruning or staking is needed. If the plants are located in light shade, the growth will be weaker and the weight of the seed pods combined with the secondary growth will weigh down the stems. In these situations, shear off ¼ of the growth along with the seed pods following bloom. This will stimulate new growth and create a more attractive and denser plant.

Come fall, the second show begins as the foliage assumes an attractive Aspen or Butter Yellow coloration (as seen below left at Willowwood Arboretum), usually lasting for upwards of 2 months! Fall color is at its best when plants are grown in full sun and looks great in combination

with *Itea virginica*, whose dark red autumn color provides a great backdrop to the *Amsonia* and lasts equally as long! Come the hard frosts of December, the foliage finally drops from the stems. Most of the stems ultimately collapse to the ground during winter, necessitating little spring clean-up!

Amsonia 'Blue Ice' is a much lower growing form, reaching 15-18" tall with dark blue, ¾" diameter flowers. It is often listed as a cultivar of *Amsonia tabernaemontana* based on the similarity of the foliage, but the parentage remains unclear. The plant was originally found in a tray of seedlings at White Flower Farm, although the name was bequeathed by Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery. Unlike its supposed parent species, 'Blue Ice' is rhizomatous or spreading (as seen at right with *Baptisia*) and plants can easily reach 20" wide or greater, making it an effective groundcover. I have grown 'Blue Ice' adjacent to *Amsonia tabernaemontana* and oddly, 'Blue Ice' went dormant during the summer while the species thrived. It happened in two locations and in both locations, it flowered just fine come the following spring. Where the plants do flourish throughout summer, as is the case at Frelinghuysen Arboretum, the foliage is the typical butter yellow come fall.

Another highly ornamental and garden worthy species is *Amsonia hubrichtii*, commonly called Arkansas Blue Star or Narrow Leaf Blue Star, a mass of which is seen on the left at the Scott Arboretum. The species honors Leslie Hubricht (1908-2005), an American naturalist who first found the plant in 1942 growing on a dry bank in Arkansas. An interesting sidenote about Hubricht – his love of nature ultimately led to the publication of 158 papers and the description of 108 mollusks and 40 crustaceans that were as yet undescribed. This would be a significant accomplishment for a well-studied individual working for a university, yet his formal education ended after his first semester of High School! He learned the skills necessary for describing new species while

working as a research assistant at the Missouri Botanical Garden from 1935-42 under Edgar Anderson (1897-1969). Ironically, while at Missouri he met Robert Everard Woodson Jr. (1904-1963), a botanist who specialized in the Apocynaceae. When Hubricht brought back the *Amsonia* specimen from Arkansas, Woodsman honored the young Hubricht with the species epithet!

Compared to its cousin, *Amsonia hubrichtii* has a far more limited native range, growing in the Ouachita Mountains of central Arkansas and Oklahoma. The biggest difference between the two species is the foliage. As the common name of Narrow Leaf Blue Star implies, the foliage is very slender, varying from 2-4" long and less than 1" wide, often only ¼" wide although it is variable. Like its cousin, the plant produces copious numbers of light green stems that stretch to 3-4' tall and up to 8' wide. The flower cymes of light blue flowers (as seen above left) also appear when the stems are near 2' tall in early May, about a week later than its cousin. Flowers persist for 2-3 weeks. Other than the later bloom time, the most notable difference between the flowers of the two species is the absence of the small hairs in the corolla tube for *Amsonia hubrichtii*.

Throughout the summer the foliage provides an incredible touch of fine texture for the garden, offering movement with even the slightest of breezes. Come fall, the foliage ranges from bright yellow to orange (as seen at right at Frelinghuysen Arboretum) and the stems can turn to a brilliant red as the closing image reveals. A stunning show that once again persist for upwards of 2 months. Following the colorful display, the stems once again collapse to the ground throughout the winter. With such great attributes, one would think the plant's popularity would have certainly mushroomed by the late 1950's. Oddly, the plant did not start to gain recognition until the mid-1990's and it was not until 2011 that it finally and most deservedly received the Perennial Plant of the Year award.

Both species are very adaptable to a variety of soil conditions, although both fair best in full sun. *Amsonia tabernaemontana* does better in humus rich and moisture retentive soils in zones 3-9. In fact, I have seen plants thriving after receiving salt-laden runoff throughout the winter from a

street. *Amsonia hubrichtii* prefers drier locations in zones 5-8, although once again I have not seen it 'object' to moister locations. I have planted both in compacted, high pH soils in narrow beds of a parking lot as seen at left. They were mulched with gravel and were subjected to tremendous amounts of radiating heat. There was no irrigation and stormwater sheeted across the beds. A tough site to be sure! However, after 25 years from planting (when this image at right was taken), the plants are still going strong, a true testament to their tough constitution! In addition, the stems and leaf veins exude a sticky white sap when cut, providing resistance to deer browse.

I honestly cannot remember when I first stumbled upon *Amsonia*. However, the years and the plants are now replete with fond memories of many friends, students and professional associates alike. Honoring centuries old friendships and horticultural dignitaries, these species are certainly more than worthy additions for adding color and many fond memories of friends to your garden!

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