

## Candytuft – A Smart Evergreen for Generations to Come

The qualities of what makes a plant garden worthy are always changing and my personal sentiments are certainly no different! As a beginning gardener, I was drawn to the ‘latest and greatest’ and discounted the more ‘seasoned plants’ at my grandparent’s home as no longer garden worthy. As I have watched plants come and go over the decades, I am continually frustrated by the disappearance of some great, garden-worthy plants to make way for the next round of the ‘latest and greatest’. By comparison, plants from my grandparent’s home remain steadfast, showcasing their garden worthiness. One ‘seasoned plant’ I remember well from my youth is *Iberis sempervirens*, commonly called Candytuft (pictured below in November).

*Iberis* is a member of the Brassicaceae, also known as the Mustard or Cabbage family. It was previously known as the Cruciferae or Cruciferous family, so named due to the cross-like appearance of the four-petaled flowers common to the family. The genus contains around 40 species, consisting of annuals, evergreen perennials and subshrubs. Subshrubs are defined as low growing woody plants, but are often sold as perennials. *Iberis sempervivum* is native to a broad area of



Europe including Spain, France, Italy and the Balkan Peninsula. It is also native to Turkey and Syria in Western Asia and Morocco and Algeria in Northern Africa. Both the genus and the species were named and described in 1753 by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). The genus name was inspired by the Iberian Peninsula, often known simply as Iberia which serves as home to numerous species of this genus. Today Iberia includes most of current day Spain, Gibraltar, Portugal and Andorra as well as parts of southern France. The species name comes from the Latin *Semper*, meaning always and *Virens* meaning ‘being green’ in reference to the evergreen foliage.

The common name of Candytuft may inspire thoughts of cotton candy but oddly, the name has nothing to do with anything sweet. Rather, it refers to the Isle of Crete, which was known as Candia from roughly 1210-1670 in recognition of its largest city of the same name. This city is now the capitol of Crete and is currently named Heraklion. Lord Edward La Zouche (1556-1625) was a wealthy English Diplomat who had a strong interest in Botany. From 1583-1587 he traveled abroad and during his excursions visited Candia where he collected seed of *Iberis*. Upon returning to England, he gifted the seed to the English Herbalist John Gerard (1545-1612) who grew and wrote of its virtues, although it is uncertain if Gerard crafted the common name. La Zouche was also a Commissioner to the Virginia Company, which was established in 1606 by King James I (1566-1625) to colonize the eastern regions of North America. At the time, Virginia was far larger, stretching from Maine to the Carolinas! Candytuft became a very popular plant during the early years of the colonies and it is suspected that La Zouche was partially responsible

for its early introduction and subsequent popularity to come! The 'tufted' portion of the common name probably refers to the billowy appearance of the plants when left unshered (as seen above).

*Iberis sempervirens* is technically a subshrub rather than a perennial, since the plant overwinters via woody stems rather than a woody crown. Plants typically grow to 12" tall and 18-24" in diameter. The oblong evergreen foliage reaches upwards of 2" long by 1/8" wide with a thick and leathery appearance. It is arranged both alternately along the stems as well as radially around the stem. Much like many other evergreens, the two-year-old leaves can be seen turning yellow in autumn and are subsequently shed. The stems have a tufted upward orientation, with the youngest portions having green bark contrasting with the more mature brown bark, as seen on the right. The white



flowers appear at the tips and are densely arranged on terminal racemes. A raceme consists of a central stem with the flowers arranged radially around that stem (as pictured at left). The lowest flowers have longer floral stems or peduncles, giving the raceme a compressed cone-like shape. The flowers open sequentially from the base of the raceme to the top over several weeks beginning in late April and display not only great beauty but great 'intelligence'.

Years back, I once called plants 'smart' and was quickly corrected by a plant scientist who noted that plants respond to environmental pressure over time and do not think. Of course, he was correct but I have always found it fun to apply human traits to plants and Candytuft has crafted its floral structure with great 'intelligence'! Typical to members of the Mustard Family, the flowers display 4 petals, with the outwardly oriented or ventral petals roughly 3 times longer than the 2 remaining dorsal or inward petals (as seen below right). These shorter petals allow for the lower flowers to have a far closer proximity to the central stem and the

flower located immediately above, packing more flowers and seed capacity into a given raceme. Of interest too is how the flowers located at the base of the raceme have longer ventral petals as compared to blossoms near the top of the raceme (as seen below left). Once again it showcases the efficient architecture of the plant, preventing the upper tier of flowers from physically obscuring the lower flowers. Each flower has 6 yellow anthers supported by green filaments that surround the female pistil. On close inspection, it becomes obvious that the anthers mature first, followed by the stigma. As the anthers fade and the pistil matures, both the style or stem that

supports the stigma and the filaments of the anthers transition from green to a deep ruddy red. Ultimately, a golden yellow spherical stigma appears atop the deep red style (as seen in the image below) and literally seems to glow in contrast to the red colors beneath. The individual ripening of the floral parts cleverly reduces the chances of self-pollination and also serves to provide yellow or red highlights to the center of each flower, potentially providing visual clues to pollinators! A very smart flower indeed!



Once the flowers have faded, the plants can be given a light shearing to remove about 1/3 of the growth. The shearing will keep the plants more compact and foster more stems, allowing for more flower bud production the following year. Shearing also removes the developing seed



heads, allowing plants to put more energy into flower production. Naturally, a plant that has been in cultivation for several hundred years will have numerous ‘improved’ selections that are somewhat more compact or offer more blooms. An old time favorite I have often used over the years is ‘Alexander’s White’. It has a much denser habit with a profuse flower display, only growing to 8-10” tall. More recent introductions include ‘Little Gem’ and ‘Purity’ which reach more diminutive

heights of 6-8” and also display heavy flowering. There are also selections with lavender flowers, such as ‘First Flush Lavendar’ and ‘Mermaid Lavender’.

Candytuft is an easy plant to grow, providing that it is located in full sun and the soils have good drainage. In its native locations, it is often found growing in gravelly, calcium rich soils with a neutral to slightly alkaline pH, although it is pH adaptable. Ideally, plants should be mulched with 1-2 inches of 3/8” or finer gravel which will aid in draining water away from the stems. As the plants age, it is not uncommon for the stems to root into the gravel, creating new plants and a greater spread. In the right conditions, it makes a splendid groundcover! Plants are hardy from zones 3-8, but in the coldest regions plants will benefit from snow cover or strategically placed evergreen boughs to prevent foliar desiccation.

Although *Iberis sempervirens* has been used ornamentally in the ‘colonies’ since the late 1600’s, its popularity was at its peak during the later part of the Victorian Era (1837-1901). Obviously, the popularity of this ‘seasoned plant’ continued far beyond and allowed me to become

acquainted with the plant during trips to my grandparent's farm. With its evergreen foliage providing ample winter interest followed by a shimmering spring floral display, it is rewarding to see how Candytuft has dodged the pitfalls of many ornamentals. Hopefully, this intelligent plant will be one my grandchildren will also remember from their youth!



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