

STEVE BENDER AND FELDER RUSHING

Passalong PLANTS



with a Foreword by Allen Lacy

IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

S&B

Common name: winter honeysuckle, Christmas honeysuckle
Botanical name: *Lonicera fragrantissima*
Type: shrub
Size: 8–10 feet tall
Hardiness: Zones 4–8
Origin: China
Light: sun or shade
Soil: almost any well-drained soil
Growth rate: fast
Mail-order source: CG, FF, HAS, MEL

I'm fairly certain that botanical names don't flow from the pen of a Madison Avenue copywriter. But whoever came up with the scientific name for winter honeysuckle surely had a way with words. Was there ever a lovelier, more evocative label than *Lonicera fragrantissima*?

Usually, you smell winter honeysuckle blooming long before you see it. Anytime from January until the beginning of March, small, creamy white blossoms emit a light, sweet, lemony scent that hitches a ride on a passing breeze and accepts passage to your nostrils. You spin around, searching for the source, but the origin isn't obvious. Like a spy, winter honeysuckle blends into the background, even when blooming.

This shrub came to America from China, then escaped to the wild. Thanks to birds that eat its red berries and spread the seed, it's become naturalized over much of the eastern United States. A naturalized setting is where it ought to remain, too, especially in home landscapes. Unfortunately, many people mistakenly plant winter honeysuckle near the front steps, so they can enjoy the fragrance as they walk out the door. But within a few years, there is hardly a door through which to walk out. In short order, the arching branches of this leafy brigand devour the mailbox, gobble up the railing, and cast a rapacious eye upon the doorbell and gutters. Desperate homeowners then hack it back with loppers and hedge trimmers, effectively ruining the bloom for next year. Trouble is, a winter honeysuckle without fragrant blooms is as savory as cottage cheese on melba toast.

No, the proper place for winter honeysuckle is an inconspicuous spot, such as the edge of a woodland, where its fragrance will thrill and its appearance will neither bore nor offend. Bill Smith, a friend in Atlanta, recalls a winter honeysuckle that grew by a wooded creek during his childhood in Macon, Georgia. The bush became a special hideaway.

"It was the perfect fort," he remembers. "The vase-shaped form provided a spacious interior, a roomy bunker in which I could find refuge and store my provisions. Its thick stems established a barricade that nixed any chance of a sneaky bushwhacker from the rear. The creek to my front allowed me to see any pirate ship and the canopy above prevented the Red Baron from getting a fix on my position! What could be more perfect? It gave me months of pure joy each year."

If spreading such joy appeals to you, the easiest way is to root tip cuttings in June. Just be sure that with every plant you pass along, you include a warning

about its appetite for houses. Else, your neighbor could awaken one morning to find his porch light gone and a bloated honeysuckle nearby with a silly grin on its face.