

PLANT PROFILE



CHRISTMAS BONUS

IN WINTER THE GLOSSY GREEN FOLIAGE OF SARCOCOCCA IS ADORNED WITH EXQUISITE CREAMY FLOWERS THAT EXUDE A DISTINCTLY SWEET HEADY SCENT. BLEDDYN WYNN-JONES UNWRAPS THE DELIGHTS OF THE CHRISTMAS BOX. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA JONES

The name Christmas box conjures up an affable picture of seasonal surprises wrapped in cheerful paper and adorned with flamboyant ribbon. For such an unassuming plant, *Sarcococca* does not disappoint. Although first introduced into cultivation prior to 1825, it was well into the second half of the 20th century before these small evergreen shrubs became widely cultivated in British gardens. Since then *Sarcococca* has become popular as low-growing evergreen ground cover, a trait in some species that was exploited as labour costs soared in municipal landscapes.

Christmas box is not the same plant as the dwarf hedging box, but it is related. Both *Sarcococca* and *Buxus* come from the *Buxaceae* family. There has been debate for some time on the number of *Sarcococca* species. Most of the botanical work on the genus was done at Kew Herbarium by Dr Otto Stapf in the first decade of the 20th century. (The resulting account was not published until 1984 by J. Robert Sealy, after Stapf's death.) Stapf sorted through the original tangle of the 1859 monograph, with additions from Joseph Hooker, and concluded that there

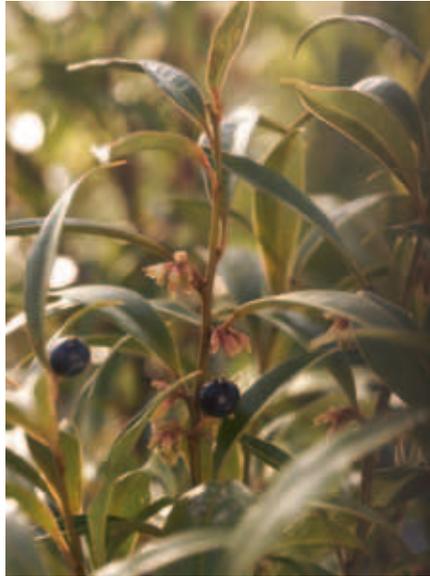
were upwards of 14 species that should be recognised. Nevertheless, despite having a widespread distribution throughout much of South East Asia, most gardeners are familiar with only a handful of species, which hail exclusively from the Sino-Himalayan area – Afghanistan and Pakistan in the dry west, to the damp eastern foothills of Sichuan and Yunnan in China.

PROPAGATION

Take semi-ripe cuttings in late summer to early autumn; this is an essential method for increasing named cultivars. Multiplying from seed is also possible but expect some variation from the parent plant, especially if grown in close proximity to other forms of the same species. The seed is best cleaned of fruit prior to sowing. Sow no deeper than the size of the seed, place in a shaded cold frame and expect seeds to germinate in the spring. *Sarcococca hookeriana* can be increased by division from the rhizome-like roots when the first sign of growth appears in the spring.

OPPOSITE: THE RED-TIPPED FLOWERS OF *SARCOCOCCA HOOKERIANA* EMERGE IN THE WINTER MONTHS. BELOW: *S. CONFUSA* IS A SPECIES THOUGHT TO HAVE OCCURRED AS A HYBRID IN CULTIVATION. ITS FLOWERS HAVE A PARTICULARLY NOTABLE SCENT.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *S. HOOKERIANA* VAR. *HOOKERIANA* PRODUCES PLUMP, DEEP PURPLE BERRIES. *S. HOOKERIANA* VAR. *DIGYNA* 'PURPLE STEM' WITH ITS SLENDER LEAVES. THE BERRIES OF *S. CONFUSA* ARE A GLOSSY BLACK. *S. HOOKERIANA*'S BRISTLE-LIKE FLOWERS.

ABOVE: *S. RUSCIFOLIA* VAR. *CHINENSIS*, ORIGINALLY FROM CHINA, IS A ROBUST VARIETY WITH ATTRACTIVE DARK GREEN LEAVES AND SMALLER CLUSTERS OF FLOWERS. THE PRONOUNCED STAMEN TIPS HERE REVEAL THESE AS MALE FLOWERS.

Sarcococca hookeriana was the first species introduced into cultivation, collected by Hooker in Sikkim in the form of *S. hookeriana* var. *hookeriana*. Still the most common species in gardens cultivated in its various forms, it usually makes a suckering shrub – 1m tall, but in moist, warm Himalayan forests it can reach 1.6m high. Alternate, narrowly elliptic, dark green leathery leaves up to 8cm long are carried on short stalks

and clothe pliable branches that bear generous quantities of scented bristly white flowers. These emerge from the axils of the leaves close to the ends of the branches, in February to March. On close inspection it is possible to differentiate between the male and female flowers within the inflorescences. The showy stamens are conspicuously tipped with purple and at first overshadow the female flowers, which are usually tucked in at the bottom of the cluster. However, after fertilisation the male flowers shrivel up, while the female flowers slowly expand throughout the summer eventually to be replaced by plump purple to black fruit, which persist as the cycle starts again in winter.

CULTIVATION

Christmas box is usually a trouble-free, evergreen shrub, which adapts easily to most gardens – even chalky soils. They should be given some shade, particularly from the strongest midday sun, which may cause yellowing or scorching of the foliage. Provided with plenty of leaf mould and moisture, Christmas box will perform well in harsh conditions, such as dry shade, for prolonged spells.

Observing the fruit it is possible to identify the different varieties, which either bear two or three persistent styles atop the fruit forming small, recurved horn-like appendages. For example, *S. hookeriana* var. *hookeriana* has three persistent styles on its fruit, while its varieties *digyna* and *humilis*, from the mountainous areas of western China, possess only two.



OPPOSITE: THE DEEP RED BERRIES OF *S. RUSCIFOLIA* BEAR THREE PERSISTENT STYLES. ABOVE: *S. WALLICHII* IS AN ELEGANT, TALLER SPECIES. BELOW: *S. BALANSAE* HAS LARGE LEAVES WITH PROMINENT VEINS.



PESTS AND DISEASES

Sarcococca are generally untroubled by pests and diseases. In mild areas red spider mite and scale insects can overwinter on plants, particularly if the summer has been dry. Red spider mite can be treated by the biological control, *Phytoseiulus*.

Sarcococca hookeriana var. *humilis* is a diminutive plant with broad leaves that has been used extensively – some argue overused – as evergreen ground cover in mass planting schemes. Nonetheless, it is a valuable asset to any winter garden with its purple-stained short stems, which rarely exceed 60cm in cultivation, and red-tipped male flowers, succeeded by plump, glossy black fruit with two persistent styles.

Sarcococca confusa lives up to its name being borne out of some confusion. There is no record of this species occurring in the wild, thus it is assumed that it is a hybrid formed in cultivation. It produces glossy black fruit, which bears both two and three 'armed' fruit even on the same branches. It is easily cultivated and tends to grow wider than its height, reaching a spread of 2m and a height of over 1m in shady conditions – more if in the shelter of a protective wall. In our garden in North Wales it flowers in March and April producing clusters of white-tipped stamens and that irresistible scent.

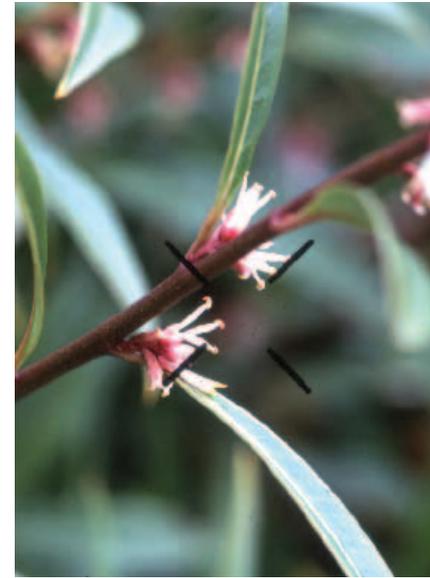
Sarcococca ruscifolia, which may be one of the progenitors of *S. confusa*, is yet another easily cultivated species that grows happily in limy soils – the species is often found growing in the wilds of western China on limestone cliffs. A densely leafy shrub at only 1.5m high it has broadly ovate, dark green slender-tipped leaves on branches that are green when young. It has a similar flowering habit to both *S. hookeriana* and *S. confusa*, but with slightly smaller flowering clusters and three-styled female flowers, which result in dark red fruit. Meanwhile the more commonly encountered variety of *S. ruscifolia* var. *chinensis* has a more robust stature. The attractive foliage is longer and narrower than the species, but is even more pronounced in

HISTORY

Sarcococca, (pronounced sar-ko-kok-ka) is derived from the Greek *sarx*, which means flesh and *kokkos*, meaning berry; the name as a whole refers to the conspicuous fleshy fruits of the genus.



ABOVE: THE PALE GREEN/YELLOW FLOWER CLUSTERS OF *S. SALIGNA* ARE LIGHTLY SCENTED. ITS LONG NARROW LEAVES GIVE THIS SMALLER SARCOCOCCA SPECIES AN ADDED ELEGANCE THAT MAKE IT AN IDEAL CHOICE FOR A GARDEN SHRUB.



ABOVE LEFT: THE YOUNG STEMS AND FLOWERS OF *S. HOOKERIANA* VAR. *DIGYNA* 'PURPLE STEM' ARE SUFFUSED WITH COLOUR. RIGHT: ANOTHER CULTIVAR OF *S. HOOKERIANA*, 'SCHILLINGII' HAS DEEP GLOSSY GREEN NARROW LEAVES.



S. ruscifolia var. *chinensis* 'Dragon Gate', which was collected by Roy Lancaster and is occasionally sold under his name.

Requiring more shelter from the cold – readily provided in its native woodland conditions in the Eastern Himalayas – *S. saligna* is absent from most of our gardens. This is a pity. It is a handsome small shrub rarely taller than 1m high, with an elegance that many species lack, mainly due to its much longer but narrow leaves up to 14cm long. The yellowish to the palest green flowering clusters are crowded towards the ends of the branches but are only lightly scented.

Sarcococca orientalis is an upright small shrub to only 1.2m high with glossy dark green, ovate, thick-textured leaves to 9cm long, on stout green branches. This is another introduction by Roy Lancaster who brought it back from China in 1980. Similar to other species with generous clusters of scented bristly white flowers and pink-tips, this species produces black fruit, which bear only two stigmas.

Sarcococca wallichii, first collected as long ago as 1821, attained its species status in 1916 but did not make its way into cultivation until Crûg Farm Plants introduced it from Darjeeling in 1994. Breaking the mould of other cultivated species, it is much taller reaching up to 3m in the wild, but less than 2m in our own garden. It also possesses the characteristic young green stems of the genus, which are upright to arching, but the elliptical rich green leaves are larger at 13cm long by 4cm wide with long narrow tips. Flowering commences in the autumn – late October to January for us – with a heady scent that exudes from the yellow-tipped, white flowering spikes. The fruit is purple-black topped by three residual styles. We collected this species from a lower altitude than *S. hookeriana* so planted it out with caution, assuming it to be tender. It has, however, proved itself to be perfectly hardy.

Another of our introductions, this time from the mountainous forests of northern Thailand, is *S. balansae*, which bears many characteristics of

S. wallichii. However, it has even larger glossy leaves to over 20cm long by 7cm wide, with prominent veins, all held on vigorous upright green stems that arch under the weight of the black two-styled fruit and turn reddish as they mature. So far the branched yellow inflorescences, which appear from March to May, have been generous but with only a faint fragrance. Only time will tell how hardy this species is.

There are still as many as eight other new species or varieties that will be introduced into cultivation in the near future and many others still to collect. The future is looking rosy for *Sarcococca* but I like to think it is already in the (Christmas) box. ■

BLEDDYN WYNN-JONES runs *Crûg Farm Plants* in north Wales together with his wife Sue. The nursery specialises in unusual herbaceous perennials, climbers and shrubs, and stocks over 2,000 plants – most of which have been brought back by Bledwyn and Sue themselves on their annual plant finding expeditions to far-flung locations.

WHERE TO SEE AND BUY

National Collection: Capel Manor College, Bullsmoor Lane, Enfield, Middlesex EN1 4RQ. Tel 020 8366 4442; www.capel.ac.uk

Ashwood Nurseries Ltd: Ashwood Lower Lane, Ashwood, Kingswinford, West Midlands DY6 0AE. Tel 01384 401996; www.ashwood-nurseries.co.uk

Crûg Farm Plants: Griffiths Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 1TU. Tel 01248 670232; www.crug-farm.co.uk. Send three second-class stamps for a catalogue.

PMA Plant Specialities: Junker's Nursery Ltd., Lower Mead, West Hatch, Taunton, Somerset TA3 5RN. Tel 01823 480774; www.junker.co.uk

PW Plants: Sunnyside, Heath Road, Kenninghall, Norfolk NR16 2DS. Tel 01953 888212; www.hardybamboo.com