

The Mexican mock oranges

JACK ALDRIDGE has surveyed some less familiar *Philadelphus* that have been introduced to cultivation in more recent years 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 approximately 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, effectively introducing them to the UK for the first time. Mark Fillan is another collector who has made a significant contribution, responsible for many new introductions, including some more recent collections which await identification.



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 sweet 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 being 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 seedling. Typical of the general confusion, it is not uncommon to find examples of this species growing as *Philadelphus mexicanus* 'Rose Syringa' – two very different plants. Historically plants have also been mislabelled *P. madrensis*, the name carried by the original introduction (CDR 1226) before it was later corrected (Rix, 2003). There is one such early planting at Ness Botanic Garden, Liverpool, where it has proven to be reliably hardy.

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 campanulate 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 relatively large flowers in comparison to the overall size of



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.

the bush, with rounded petals and a very prominent central boss of golden yellow 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. 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 in a free-draining position, with more shelter than *P. maculatus* requires, which is of a tougher constitution.

Coulteri group

A star among the recent introductions has been *Philadelphus sargentianus* (aff.), 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

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*.



close relatives, it has made a large scandent shrub to nearly 2 m, with arching stems looking to a host for support. None of the three specimens have shown cold damage after more than ten years outside in Kent, while plants in Staffordshire have been untouched by recent cold winters.

One species that has now 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 (MSF 34-14). 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 circulating under that name more recently, including those labelled as such at Kew, may in fact be *Philadelphus pringlei*. Originally from another Fairey & Schoenfeld collection, they agree with comments that distinguish it based on its dense intensely silver indumentum, pale green leaves and very 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. Adapted to survive in cracks in limestone cliff faces in the wild, it is so far living up to these credentials of drought tolerance in cultivation, which is a promising attribute of such an attractive plant.

Plants that do better fit the description of *Philadelphus calcicola* are also in cultivation, however, from





58 Flowers borne in panicles is a key feature that distinguishes *Philadelphus affinis* from *P. mexicanus*, which are both climbing species.

another Fillan & Macer introduction (F&M 315), collected in 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 one grown as *Philadelphus karwinskianus*. A plant in Maurice Foster's garden raised from seed collected by Bob Cherry under that name has climbed a large ash to a height of nearly six metres by means of powerful, scandent stems, from which it bears elongated panicles of large white scented flowers on pendant side shoots. Based on its performance thus far, it requires a sheltered position and is best described as semi-evergreen.

Other plants raised from a Fillan & Macer collection made alongside Bob Cherry (presumably from the

same plant) in Puebla State in 2004 (F&M 152) are near identical. Although in circulation under both names, these have more recently been attributed to *Philadelphus affinis*, along with others by Mark Fillan from Hidalgo State (including MSF 35-06). According to Hu, it is said to differ from *P. karwinskianus* in its glabrous hypanthium (as opposed to thickly lanate) – a minor botanical difference. *Philadelphus pueblanus* is another closely-related species. While careful examination of these allied species would be useful from a taxonomic standpoint, from a horticultural perspective they are almost indistinct, with much to be said for treating them as a single species. Perhaps the only differences between collections is hardiness, which is yet to be properly tested.

The true *Philadelphus mexicanus* differs from the above in having solitary flowers and only occurs south of the Sierra Madre Oriental and into Guatemala. In southern Mexico (and Guatemala) another species *Philadelphus myrtoides* occurs, which extends as far south as Chiriqui Province in Panama, the southern limit to the genus' distribution. Included for interest is a collection from Guatemala by Bleddyn & Sue Wynn-Jones (BSWJ 10436) attributed to this species. 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*! Plants raised from this collection have unfortunately only borne white flowers in cultivation, which is likely due to the lack of heat year-round.

The Rose Syringa question

In principle, *Philadelphus mexicanus* has been in cultivation longer than any other Mexican species, if as the clone 'Rose Syringa'. Like the others it makes a climber capable of reaching lofty heights, with large, cupped flowers with a distinctive maroon-red central blotch, opening white maturing to a creamy pale yellow. Usually considered tender, it is recommended for a warm wall where it can perform well. Likely 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 its characteristic 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, along with other hybrids. 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 confusion are some exciting garden plants, which undoubtedly broaden 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, or drought tolerance poses exciting opportunities for some imaginative hybridisation; a prospect that is already being realised among those growing them, which we will begin to see more of.

References

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