



HIMALAYAN PERFUMIER

Roy Lancaster examines several of the selections of his favourite winter-flowering shrub, *Daphne bholua*, which produce sweetly-scented white or pink blooms

OF ALL THE WINTER-FLOWERING shrubs I cherish and admire, *Daphne bholua* is unquestionably my favourite. I grow it in my garden along with *Hamamelis mollis*, *Viburnum x bodnantense* 'Dawn' and *Garrya elliptica* 'James Roof' and, while all contribute to the pleasure of my garden, I have room for only one of each. For *Daphne bholua*, however, I have made space for eight. So why is this shrub so special?

Well, for a start, it is, with few exceptions, evergreen, with beautiful flowers that possess a fragrance as powerful and as personal as wintersweet or *Viburnum farreri*. Secondly, it is of reasonable vigour, upright in habit, fairly compact and well behaved. In addition, it is tolerant of a range of soils, growing especially well on moist but well-drained acidic to neutral substrates. Some gardeners grow them to their satisfaction on alkaline soils where moisture is available through summer and the soil enriched with a mulch of organic matter, particularly leafmould. It is least successful on dry, shallow, chalk soils and those that are heavy and badly drained.

On average, *D. bholua* selections will reach 2–2.5m high by 1.5–2m across, though when grown in favourable, sheltered sites in full sun a height of 3m or more is not unusual. Indeed, I once found in the forests of east Nepal an example, albeit on a single stem, 6m tall. As for longevity, 15–20 years is not unusual for a plant in good health and free of stress. Thus far, there are a lot of plus points and if you are expecting a bonus then *D. bholua* comes with an inspirational background of the world's highest mountains, rhododendron forests and a tale of derring-do.

Natural habitat

In the wild, *D. bholua* is found at altitudes of 2,000–2,900m, sometimes higher, in the eastern Himalaya from Nepal to Bhutan where it grows in thickets, on forest margins and higher up, in pastures and grassy glades. It is variable in leaf: lower-altitude plants being evergreen,

while those from the higher altitudes are invariably deciduous. It was a seedling of the latter kind that was collected by Major Tom Spring Smyth in 1962 at 3,200m on the Milke Danda Ridge in east Nepal and introduced to England via a bamboo basket, a diplomatic bag and the first-class compartment of an airliner. It was not the first introduction of *Daphne bholua*, and other collections have been introduced many times since, which is why, together with selective breeding, we now have a choice of different selections – some of them named – to choose from (see box, left).

Daphne cultivars may be grafted, micropropagated or sometimes raised from cuttings. Grafted plants seem to be more floriferous but not as long lived as micropropagated individuals. Fruits are rarely produced on plants in cultivation, especially those grown in isolation. Other than 'Gurkha', all are evergreen or semi-evergreen depending on the severity of the winter.

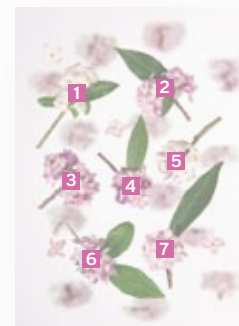
Have I been able to tempt you into trying this choice, winter-flowering gem from the roof of the world? As a source of inspiration in the coldest months, I would not be without it. ■

Roy Lancaster VMH is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

DAPHNES

Daphne bholua cultivars:

- 1 'Alba': quite bushy, flowers vary from pure white to a pale pink flush. Can flower from January to March.
- 2 Wakehurst forms: variable plants raised from seed collected by Sir Peter Smithers in the 1970s.
- 3 *D. bholua* var. *glacialis* 'Gurkha': deciduous, and the plant Spring Smyth collected. Strongly scented mauve-pink and white flowers in January and February.
- 4 'Limpsfield': a new cultivar of vigorous upright growth raised as a seedling from 'Peter Smithers' in 2000. Its flowers are darker than those of its parent; usually flowers from February into March.
- 5 'Darjeeling': vigorous, upright habit, white to pale pink-flushed flowers from November into December but appreciates a sheltered site.
- 6 'Peter Smithers': dark red-purple buds open to pink flowers in January and February. Selected from seed collected by the late Sir Peter Smithers on the Daman Ridge in Nepal.
- 7 'Jacqueline Postill': popular, vigorous, upright but compact, broadening later. Large, rosy-pink and white, fragrant flowers January to March.



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i All the plants mentioned are available from nurseries listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2008–2009* or at www.rhs.org.uk/rhsplantfinder/plantfinder.asp

@ For more *D. bholua* descriptions and history, see: www.rhs.org.uk/Plants/plant_groups/daphne_bholua.asp