

First Newsletter for the Marsh Botanical Garden Users

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I'd like to recap a little bit of yesterday's conversation with many of the graduate and post-doctoral students (I have no idea who is in which category, nor do I need to know).

The issues that I remember coming out were:

- The problem of mixing soil-less mixes. Our basic formula delivered to the growth chambers is Metromix 200, which is, according to the specs in the catalog, "50-60% vermiculite, 20-30% peat moss and 12-20% perlite." Some of the folks add additional ingredients to this mix, for a number of reasons. The mixing situations are cramped, and probably in some cases less than sterile. Unfortunately, we do not have the space, the time nor the conveyance to get the custom mixes to you in a way that ensures their sterility. Reports of past experience make it important for this process to be in the hands of the end-users. I suggested the purchase or otherwise availability of an electric 'pug-mill.' Perhaps we could also take a look at the spaces available to you for this operation, and have a mixing box prototype built to test for its effectiveness as a labor-, time- and back-saving device.
- Cleanliness of growth rooms. We were asked if a vacuum cleaner with a special long snout-like attachment could be made available to you on a periodic basis so that the folks responsible for the growth chambers can clean them more thoroughly. I will invest in a wet-dry shop vacuum, we will jury-rig a snout that reaches under the bottom shelf, and make this available to each lab on a monthly basis, with a sign up sheet. It's a piece of equipment that should be cared for properly, returned fairly clean and be accounted for so that it doesn't get 'liberated' for anything other than the professional use by Marsh Botanical Garden clients. As well, if the users are uncertain about the trans-genetic possibilities of the debris being vacuumed, we will have to develop a protocol about what to do with the detritus.
- Spraying of pests. Several concerns came up here.
 - One is that the effectiveness of whatever we do spray must be assured. I will work with Dave on coming up with a list of chemicals that we use, which ones are effective, which could be better rotated with another class of chemical to avoid resistance, etc.
 - Two is that the air exchange information between growth chambers in one location is not clear. Several said that they didn't want to be exposed to pesticide residue from a chamber next to the one they were working in. Someone else said that there was NO air movement in the growth chamber that that person was familiar with. We may need help in determining which chambers are less than air tight, which are not.
 - Three is that a better labeling and notification system could be evolved to let people know what was sprayed when, what the re-entry time is, etc. I will work with Dave on this, as well.

The first Plant of the Week is blooming now along the south and east walls of the Peabody Museum. Corneliancherry Dogwood is the common name, referred to more formally as **Cornus mas**.

The genus *Cornus* belongs to the Dogwood family, *Cornaceae*, which consists of 10 genera and about ninety species. This family of dicots includes trees, shrubs and a few herbaceous species, spread in mostly the northern hemisphere of both the Old World and the New World, not to be confused with recent remarks by the present administration delineating an “Old Europe” and a somewhat newer model.

The Latin name of the plant that is blooming near the Peabody was *Cornus*, which gives us the source of the generic name. The specific name comes also from the Latin, denoting the male, or ‘more robust’ of the genus. Don’t take this out on me; I’m just a conduit.

So *Cornus mas* is a native of central and southern Europe and western Asia. Its flowering time, in late March into April here, is its most outstanding ornamental aspect. The yellow to greenish-yellow (chartreuse?) flowers are actually more bract than sex, a condition shared by some if not all mammals. The flowers are very small (1/4 inch at best), but held in umbels that measure about 3/4 inch across. These are very showy at a time of year when not much else is going on in the outside world as far as bloom goes. An interesting companion planting might be mixing a planting of *Cornus mas* with *Pieris floribunda* or *P. japonica*, with some of the minor bulbs, like *Scilla*, *Crocus* and *Chionodoxa*, scattered beneath.

For those with a yard and the inclination, *Cornus mas* is very easily grown. Although I haven’t been here long enough to determine if it is readily available in the garden center and nursery trade, my instincts tell me that if you look hard enough, you can find one. It is easily transplanted as a balled-and-burlapped youngster, or as a container grown plant. As with all such plant purchases, be sure to inspect the container or ball closely to ensure that it is not pot-bound, too severely root-pruned or otherwise compromised. For instance, if the main stem wiggles around in the ball or the soil too easily, avoid that specimen.

Plant in partial shade or full sun, in reasonable garden soil. Like many plants, it prefers deep, rich well-drained loam, but unlike many other Dogwood species, it is very adaptable as regards the pH, fertility, texture or structure of the soil. The specimens near the Peabody are somewhat leggy in response to the low light conditions and their placement next to a building. I would look to plant them somewhat further out, although the fact that they are backed up by a stone wall, makes the flower stand out somewhat better. One could as well use an evergreen background to the same or better effect.

Another interesting aspect of *Cornus mas* is its exfoliating bark, which refers to the layered, peeling, scaly look of the trunk. “Gray-brown to rich brown” is the way Michael Dirr describes it, although this is highly variable from specimen to specimen, as is the fall color. Non-existent in some plants, red to purple in others, this would add another season of interest to the landscape value of the plant.

Lest we be lost in anthropocentric navel-contemplation, this plant, when blooming will attract the early honeybee, who will venture out if the temperature is above fifty two degrees Fahrenheit or so, and it’s not raining. The fruit, an oblong 5/8 x 1/2 inch drupe, is also food for bird, squirrel and other wildlife. Back to our particularly human point of view, these red fruits, ripening in July, are used in making jam, and also in producing an alcoholic beverage known as *Vin de Cornouille*.

Please don’t hesitate to get back to me with suggestions, complaints, contributions and cash donations for the newsletter or the Plant of the Week column. Sincerely, Eric

