



NORTHWEST
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Horticulturally Yours
Fortnightly Plant Column from DANIEL SPARLER

An Encomium for Eucryphia

Dear NHS members and friends,

On many a frosty morn or murky midwinter afternoon of late, I find my mind drifting half a world away, gliding southeasterly thousands of miles along the Pacific Coast before coming to rest in a land luxuriating in full-blown summer—the Valdivian temperate rain forest of southcentral Chile. This verdant, volcano-studded realm of natural wonders is the source of a plethora of plants that have become essential elements in our PNW gardens, from ferns to fuchsias and azaras to alstroemerias. Looking up from the forest floor, I see a host of evergreen sentinels familiar to discerning tree lovers, including *Araucaria*, *Drimys*, *Embothrium*, *Nothofagus* and *Podocarpus*. Perhaps the most alluring arboreal attraction is the fragrant, snow-white floral wall produced in midsummer by *Eucryphia cordifolia* and its close kin, *E. glutinosa*. This genus is the subject of today's reflection.



Of the seven *Eucryphia*¹ species, only three are common in cultivation: the two Chileans mentioned above and *E. lucida*, a native of Tasmania. However, it is hybrids of this trio that are of greatest interest to gardeners due to their fabulous flowers (nectar rich as well as beautiful, they are magnetic to pollinators), and their elegant evergreen foliage. Of the half dozen *Eucryphia* taxa I grow in my Seward Park garden in southeast Seattle, my favorites are *E. x intermedia* 'Rostrevor', *E. x nymansensis* 'Nymansay' and *E. x nymansensis* 'Mount Usher'². As each member of this trio is columnar in nature, even a small garden can accommodate one as a stunning specimen or accent plant. They thrive in partial sun (although when young, shelter from scorching afternoon sun and desiccating cold wind is advised), but also look smashing in a woodland setting.



For those of us in the northern hemisphere with an aim to nurture long-lived eucryphias, we can expect a profusion of sweetly scented, cup-shaped 2-inch blossoms in July and August – on mature trees, that is. Patience is required. In my experience flowering commences in earnest seven or more years after planting. But when that moment comes, you'll be amply rewarded. This past year, 2020, prompted the best show ever not only in the eucryphias in my garden, but also in gorgeous specimens I spotted all around town.



Chile offers the world much in addition to horticultural pearls. Surely the country's best known cultural export is the work of Pablo Neruda, whose prodigious poetry ran the gamut from topics as lofty as the origin of the universe down to praise of humble but indispensable everyday items such as tomatoes or onions. Among his 225 odes to ordinary objects is an homage to our beloved pollinators; I can't help thinking he must have witnessed an apiary army at work in a grove of eucryphias. Here —with an anchoring reference to Mount Osorno in the heart of the Valdivian forest— is a portion of his "Ode to Bees":

*Buzzing, noisy workers process the nectar, swiftly exchanging drops of ambrosia; it is summer siesta in the green solitudes of Osorno. High above, the sun casts its spears into the snow, volcanoes glisten, land stretches endless as the sea, space is blue, but something trembles, it is the fiery heart of summer, the honeyed heart multiplied, the buzzing bee, the crackling honeycomb of flight and gold!*³

Eucryphia honey, called *miel de ulmo* in Chile and leatherwood honey in Tasmania (ulmo and leatherwood being the local common names, respectively, of *E. cordifolia* and *E. lucida*) is treasured by connoisseurs for its intensely perfumed balsamic flavor and creamy texture. Local beekeepers, take note! I see a eucryphia in your future.

Wishing you all stimulating flights of fancy until we meet again in February, just before Valentine's Day.

Horticulturally yours,
Daniel

Notes:

- 1) *Eucryphia* derives from two Greek lexical elements: "eu" for good or well and "kryphios" for hidden or concealed, a reference to the small sepals that form a cap over the flower buds. When the flower opens, the cap falls off, littering the ground with its cute and curious presence.
- 2) Each of these three cultivars was discovered or developed in Irish or English gardens. 'Rostrevor' (which to my eye has the most appealing foliage and as such forms a key component of my winter garden) is a cross between *E. glutinosa* and *E. lucida*, while 'Nymansay' (usually the most prolific bloomer) and 'Mount Usher' (also a heavy bloomer, but with smaller leaves) resulted from crossing the two Chilean species.
- 3) Extracted from Pablo Neruda's "Oda a la abeja" (Ode to Bees), translated by Margaret Sayers Penden, found in *Odes to Common Things*, published by Bulfinch Press in 1994.