



Azaras in Abundance

Dear NHS Members and Friends,

One spring day nearly 30 years ago, when I was a neophyte gardener but already bitten by the plant-collecting bug, I could scarcely contain my enthusiasm as I showed off the cute and curious pocketbook blossoms of a newly acquired *Calceolaria* 'John Innes' to a friend, a transplanted Brit with far more experience in horticulture than I. Not grasping the reason for his polite silence, I asked him directly what he thought of it. After a moment's hesitation he replied, in his oh-so-posh accent, "Hmm. Pity it's yellow." Noting my crestfallen look, he clarified his position: "Yellow is such a violent color in the garden." Abashed and feeling a bit cowed by my gauche naïveté, I mumbled something about finding it cheerful, nonetheless.

Looking back now, I regret not having been more assertive in my defense of that sun-drenched hue. What is a spring garden without the joy bestowed in wild abandon by bulbs of golden *Narcissus*, or woody wonders like *Edgeworthia*, *Kerria*, *Hamamelis*, and *Corylopsis*? (Although even I draw the line at *Forsythia*.) To my mind, the golden aristocrats among spring-blooming shrubs are a half-dozen species in the genus *Azara*.¹



Like the diminutive *Calceolaria* so cruelly dissed by my friend, most azaras are natives of Chile. Hailing from the same bioregion as *Eucryphia*, azaras are evergreen and produce fragrant, puffy yellow blossoms from late winter through mid-spring. They vary a bit in hardiness, from the cold-tolerant *A. microphylla* to the somewhat tender *A. petiolaris*. I have grown both, along with four others, for nearly two decades in my Seattle garden and have not noticed lasting winter damage on any. In fact, when my 15-foot-tall *A. petiolaris* was so encased

in heavy, wet snow in February 2019 that it was practically prostrate, its supple trunk and branches bounced back immediately when I removed the frozen white stuff that had encased them.

PHOTO: *Azara* foliage, from L to R: *A. petiolaris*, *A. serrata*, *A. microphylla* 'Variegata', *A. lanceolata*, *A. integrifolia*

As vibrant as the petal-free puffball blossoms are (the flowers are virtually all stamens), they scarcely upstage the fabulous foliage. Although the lustrous, leathery leaves differ in shape and length, those of most species are serrated, and share the fetching feature of having a smaller, rounded, accessory leaflike stipule hovering near the base of each true leaf. (*A. integrifolia* sports a pair of stipules for each leaf.) Azaras thrive in cool partial shade; they resent scorching sun or prolonged heat and drought.

Here's a brief rundown of my favorites:

The first azara to make its mark in the Pacific Northwest was the hardiest, the aptly named, winter-flowering, vanilla-scented ***A. microphylla***², grown for more than 100 years in these parts. Huge specimens can be spotted flanking older, stately homes in the Capitol Hill and Queen Anne neighborhoods. The variegated version offers a stunning foliar effect when young, but as it's a fast grower (to 25 feet in 15 years), I'd advise planting it on a downhill slope. Otherwise in a few years the pretty but tiny leaves will only be enjoyed by birds and squirrels.

The most flamboyant species to my eye are ***A. serrata*** and ***A. petiolaris***, which share the distinction of producing larger blossoms, up to 1½ inches wide. They've long been confused in the trade (*A. petiolaris* was sold to me as *A. dentata*). Here's how to tell them apart: *A. dentata* has orange fruit and woolly leaves. *A. serrata* often reblooms in late summer. It bears off-white fruit, has longer, oval leaves, slightly fuzzy on both surfaces, and the most delightful, downy, almost velvety stems. —I admit to rubbing them along my lips for the tickle it induces. Try it, you'll like it!— While *A. petiolaris* also has off-white fruit and serrated leaves, these are rounder, smooth on both surfaces, and the stems lack the silky magic of *A. serrata*. However, as *A. petiolaris* is a larger presence, it puts on a stunning floral show during its single act in April and May.



My vote for most elegant goes to ***A. lanceolata***, named (unsurprisingly) for its lance-shaped leaves. The specimen I've nurtured for 18 years is now a smooth-topped, inverted umbrella-shaped, compact 7-foot shrub whose graceful array of canary-colored blossoms, although individually smaller than the two mentioned above, nearly carpet the tops of the tightly spaced branches.

Finally comes the oddball, ***A. integrifolia***, which differs from the others in two ways: As its name suggests, leaf edges are smooth, not toothed, and foliage is a darker, blue-tinged green. Beware: If left to its own devices, this one may shoot up to 40 feet. I confess to having sawed mine down a few years ago when it invaded the airspace of my beloved *Eucryphia* 'Rostrevor'. However, I left a bare, knee-high stump in the ground; the next spring it sprouted luxurious growth and is now a well-rounded, better-behaved 7-footer.

We'll meet again in March, just in time to celebrate the equinox.

Horticulturally yours,
Daniel

Notes:

1) The genus, formally described in 1794 and named to honor Spanish naturalist Félix de **Azara** (1746-1821), until recently was placed in Flacourtiaceae, a now defunct pantropical botanical family. Azara is properly assigned to the willow family, **Salicaceae**. There are 11 recognized species, most native to Chile and Argentina, others ranging from Bolivia and Uruguay to southern Brazil.

2) We should all be grateful that species names of Azara are both logical and instructive: ***microphylla*** = small leaf, ***dentata*** = toothed leaf, ***serrata*** = serrated leaf, ***integrifolia*** = undivided leaf, ***lanceolata*** = lance-shaped leaf, ***petiolaris*** = petiolate (having a stalk that attaches leaf to stem).

