



NORTHWEST  
HORTICULTURAL  
SOCIETY

*Horticulturally Yours*  
Fortnightly Plant Column from DANIEL SPARLER

Hello again, NHS Gardeners,

As if to assuage our angst in this extended season of discontent, nature has seen fit to confect for us weary gardeners a chromatically abundant autumn. Yet even as the flaming foliage of trees such as *Acer*, *Liquidambar*, *Stewartia*, *Ginkgo*, and *Cercidiphyllum* light up our lives, a small but reliable retinue of workhorse perennials and shrubs continue to bestow their blossoms on us long after most of their cohorts have called it quits.

Inspecting my own garden on an unexpectedly balmy afternoon in early November, I am struck by the realization that of the plants still in the flush of radiant bloom, a whopping majority—representing 10 genera—originally hail from Latin America. This dazzling decahedron comprises *Dahlia*, *Fuchsia*, *Salvia*, *Alstroemeria*, *Aechmea*, *Brugmansia*, *Tropaeolum*, ***Abutilon***, ***Cestrum*** and perhaps most regally, ***Tibouchina***. Other than dahlias, which originated in Mexico and Central America, they all emerged in South America, from the cloud forests of Colombia to the plains of Patagonia. With a modicum of care, many can settle into our temperate Puget Sound setting. Let's consider the three examples noted above in boldface.



**Abutilon.** These hibiscus relatives (Malvaceae family), commonly called “flowering maple” due to the shape of the leaves, are usually grown as annuals in our climate, although they are half-hardy shrubs that—if given the proper treatment—can live for decades in our gardens. As a case in point my cultivar ‘Vesuvius’ is 23 years old. Secrets to success in growing ***Abutilon x hybridum*** cultivars include planting them deeply in well-draining soil (bury the bottom three inches of the stalk) so that underground buds can emerge even if the top growth is frozen out. For insurance, or to increase your supply, take cuttings from spring through late summer. These strike roots easily either in water or in a loose mix of perlite and potting soil. With any luck in a few years you’ll see seedlings pop up around some mature plants. If you are inclined to experiment, these highly variable offspring are worth pricking out and potting up. Although many of the resulting seedlings will be ordinary, a few may succeed in blowing your mind with the understated elegance of their nodding bells that sway in the slightest breeze.

Taxonomic note: *Abutilon* is from the Arabic “abū-ṭīlūn” for a southern Asian shrub in this widespread genus of plants indigenous to subtropical and tropical regions around the world. Hort-head alert: The taxonomy gods recently removed the ornamental hybrids we grow (all derived from South American species) from the genus *Abutilon* and placed them in a new genus, *Callianthe*, which aptly means “beautifully flowering”. This change has not yet caught on in the trade.



**Cestrum.** A couple of decades ago several flashy cultivars of this genus of nightshades (Solanaceae family) made quite the splash in our area. It's easy to see why, as these evergreen shrubs pump out masses of tubular blooms (in just about every floral color but blue) from late spring until frost. However, most of these, such as the pink *Cestrum elegans* var. *smithii* and deep red *Cestrum* 'Newellii', resulted as unreliably hardy, at least for me, severely wounded if not flat out dead at the end of some average winters. Imagine my delight upon discovering the truly hardy *C. parqui* 'Orange Peel', a native of central Chile that emerges unscathed every spring and produces copious clusters of sunny flowers well into December most years. If left unchecked 'Orange Peel' will

grow to 12 feet or more; you'll want to lop it back to around knee height in March in order to encourage bushiness as well as keep blossoms closer to eye level. Most sources claim that 'Orange Peel' is fragrant at night, although I cannot detect an aroma.

Taxonomic note: *Cestrum* was the ancient Greek name for an unrelated shrub that resembled jasmine. Refreshingly, the specific epithet, *parqui*, is the plant's vernacular name in Chile. Also spelled "palqui", this term likely originated in the indigenous Mapudungun language still spoken by more than a million people in parts of Chile and Argentina.



**Tibouchina.** Although this sprawling genus of bold evergreens, centered in Brazil but found as far north as Mexico and the Caribbean, boasts 240 species of shrubs and trees, only one captures our interest: *Tibouchina urvilleana*. Virtually every element of this gorgeous shrub is captivating. There, I've said it. What's not to admire about its velvety soft square stems, elliptical fuzzy leaves that turn orange in cold weather, and pubescent red buds that open to reveal sumptuous and satiny 4-inch wide, 5-petaled blossoms of royal purple with come-hither recurved

stamens? No wonder that its common names include princess-flower and glory-bush. A container plant for us, this wonder comes to its full splendor in autumn and will bloom right up to a hard freeze. I've grown one in a large glazed ceramic pot for 20 years, dragging it into an unheated garage only during prolonged cold snaps. It looks mighty bedraggled come April, but this is of no consequence, as it should be pruned back hard to six inches to stimulate new, compact growth.

Taxonomic note: *Tibouchina* derives from an indigenous Guianese vernacular name for one species, while *urvilleana* honors Jules Dumont d'Urville, a prolific 19<sup>th</sup> century French explorer and botanist. This plant's botanical family (Melastomataceae, which seems not to have a common name) is too interesting to ignore. It's composed of two Greek words, "melas" (black) and "stoma" (mouth), because the fruit of some edible species stains the lips black.

With that settled, it's time to pamper my princess-flower. We'll meet again mid-month.

Horticulturally yours,  
Daniel