



NORTHWEST
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Horticulturally Yours
Fortnightly Plant Column from DANIEL SPARLER

EDGEWORTHIA'S ORBS OF GOLD

*Not knowing / The name of the tree,
I stood in the flood / Of its sweet smell.
It is a bit too cold / To be naked
In this stormy wind / Of February.¹*

—Bashō, c. 1688

Dear NHS Members and Friends,



Unphased thus far by the withering winter wind, my mature *Edgeworthia chrysantha*² stands leafless yet radiant, unclad but unabashed, seemingly warmed from within by the blaze of its 200 or so spherical floral clusters that shimmer like so many diminutive suns at the end of each burnt-sienna-tinged branch. Like a mysterious and captivating stranger that bedazzles all who approach, this elfin beauty exceeds expectations even as it defies categorization. Among its alluring attributes are intensely and persistently fragrant flowers, handsome and silver-veined summer foliage, bark that yields the highest quality paper,

medicinal potential of great promise, and an easy-going nature that makes few demands of the gardener.

What is unclear is the actual identity of this highly variable botanical shapeshifter. There is no agreement among experts as to how many species the genus contains, or which are the proper names for the most widely grown varieties. The older of my specimens (now exceeding 8 feet tall by 12 feet wide) I procured at Heronswood in 1999. Examination of 10 years of Heronswood catalogs shows the plant listed under four different names: first as *E. papyrifera*, then as *E. chrysantha*, *E. gardenii* and finally *E. gardneri*. There is an emerging consensus that almost all the deciduous plants marketed today are varieties of the same species (*E. chrysantha*, although some scientific sources insist its valid name is *E. tomentosa*) with smaller forms being diploid and larger, more robust ones tetraploid in terms of chromosome count. Occasionally available here (but more widely in New Zealand and Australia) is a much larger evergreen species, the actual *E. gardneri*, which Dan Hinkley reports having seen in Nepal growing treelike to 30 feet.

As to *E. chrysantha* (a portmanteau of Greek words for “gold” and “flower” —an apt name that I hope sticks), it is native to southern China but naturalized in Japan and the southern coast of Korea. Grown in Japan for at least 600 years, it has tremendous cultural importance there, where it is called *mitsumata* (literally “three prongs”: all parts branch into triads), and is best known as the source of the highest-grade *washi* paper³, used to make Japan’s [bank notes](#) and for fine calligraphy. Stark-white, bleached branches of *mitsumata*⁴ are often employed in ikebana to add strongly architectural elements to floral/botanical arrangements. Infusions made from the flowers of *E. gardneri* have long been used medicinally in Tibet and other parts of China, and recent studies sponsored by the National Institutes of Health suggest it may be beneficial in treating [type 2 diabetes](#).



There is a smaller, red-orange flowered form in commerce that some find even more attractive than the larger, gold-standard type. Usually marketed as 'Akebono' and mistranslated as 'Red Dragon' —the Japanese word *akebono* means “dawn” or “daybreak”— its name in Japan is 'Akabana', which conveniently means “red flower”. (I've grown this one for nine years, planting it about 10 feet from its much larger, golden sibling. The two have just now started to interlace their branches; it's really sweet.) Most likely it is identical to the cultivar marketed as 'Rubra' (Latin for “red”). Distinctive, newer forms are edging closer to the horizon: [Windcliff Plants](#) lists a new mango/apricot-colored form selected by Dan Hinkley from his own seedlings. He's calling it 'Windcliff Sunrise'.

I write these lines two days before an unusually frigid late February air mass is forecast to wallop us. We'll see if the flowers, now fully open, can withstand a hard freeze, as the buds (formed the previous autumn) clearly can. In a recent conversation, Dan H. told me that the late, great [J.C. Raulston](#) used to say that “you could put *Edgeworthia* buds in liquid nitrogen and they would never show damage,” which, Dan adds, “is saying something considering it puts its buds out there on a dare in October.” I'm holding my breath their assessment is correct.

Horticulturally yours,
Daniel

1. From “The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel” in [The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches](#), by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa. (London: Penguin Books, 1966).
2. The genus *Edgeworthia* is yet another botanical tribute to a European plant collector (or poacher). Named for Michael Pakenham Edgeworth (1812-81), an Irish botanist who worked in India for several decades for the colonialist British civil service.
3. This explains the plant's most widely used common name in English, “paperbush,” as well as the source of the now invalid species name *Edgeworthia papyrifera*, for “paper bearing.” The process of extracting paper from the bush requires the following: In winter, cut three-year old branches, then steam, dry, soak, scrape, bleach, cook, rinse, beat, and finally spread the pulp to dry. Voila! You've got sheets of the finest paper.
4. I'm rooting for the expanded use of *mitsumata* as a common term in English. Botanical guru [David Fairchild](#), who introduced *Edgeworthias* to the U.S. from Japan more than 100 years ago, referred to the plant as such in his 1938 memoir, *The World Was My Garden*. (The [UW Miller Library](#) has two copies.)



Edgeworthia, in bud, in flower, and summer foliage with *Crocsmia* flowers