

A PLANT OF INTEREST: EDGEWORTHIA

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This plant has caused me severe embarrassment, and I felt it only fair to ensure that a similar fate does not befall any fellow HPS Derbyshire member by writing this article! My tale of woe began when Martin and Chris Brown opened their garden to our group on 7 July, 2010. The evening included a plant identification quiz and I agonised, much to Martin's amusement, over the name of one of the subjects, a five foot high shrub with plenty of leaf but no flowers. However, I just could not bring its name to mind. All was duly revealed, and the plant proved to be edgeworthia. Well of course I knew it: I now recalled its masses of white cup-shaped flowers with yellow stamens. No further identification problems would ensue when I saw this plant again.

As I arrived at our March meeting this year, I met Martin in the car park, where he was delighted to give me a sneak preview of a flowering specimen he had cut from a plant in his garden to show members at the meeting. It had three 'flower balls', each comprising of masses of individual slender, tubular flowers, creamy-coloured for most of their length but turning to a beautiful yellow/gold at the 'trumpet end'. The flowers were mounted on a woody, leafless stem which was warm brown in colour, with small grey flecks. Please note at this point, however, that my wife believes I am nigh on colour blind: a scandalous accusation. Not only was the flower eye-catching, it carried a really strong scent, which I likened to lemon or honey, but then again I probably also suffer from aroma-identification deficiency. I had to concede to Martin that I could not identify the specimen but commented that, flower-wise, it reminded me of daphne (the plant, not a member), but I had never before seen a daphne with this warm, appealing colour. Martin then disappeared into the hall, smiling.

The specimen was duly passed round at the meeting, and Martin announced that it was taken from his edgeworthia. Oh dear! White cup-shaped flowers? Yellow stamens? Well, red face, anyway. It must have been eucryphia that I had been thinking of, unless you can think of a better excuse for me. To ensure that I don't expose myself to further embarrassment, I decided that I must really become familiar with edgeworthia, and unearthed the following facts with the help of Martin, Chris and Google.

To my relief, my research revealed that edgeworthia is related to daphne, so that made me feel a lot better. It is native to China and the Himalayas. It is also known as the paper bush and *E. papyrifera* is used to make high quality Japanese banknotes. However, the most common form in the UK is *E. chrysantha*, which, from its description, seems to be Martin and Chris's plant. This is described as growing up to 5 feet high and 5 feet wide with strongly scented, tubular, yellow winter flowers with a clove-like scent, which form round heads of 1.5 - 2 inches diameter. A pleasing, fleeting feature is the frosted appearance given by its silky white hairs when in bud. The leaves are lance-shaped to oval, up to 6 inches long and dark green in colour. Stems are said to be very flexible with a papery, cinnamon-coloured bark. The only pruning needed is of crossing, dead, diseased and damaged stems (but it is said to be very pest and disease resistant). Propagation is by seed or semi-ripe cuttings in summer. Autumn mulching is recommended.

I am fired with enthusiasm for the plant, but it does come with a health warning. Matthew Wilson, in a past Daily Telegraph article, describes it as a 'tricky treat' for 'the more adept gardener'. It is hardy down to around -5°C and requires planting in full sun or dappled shade. The 'usual' moisture-retentive, humus-rich well-drained, loamy soil is preferable. A sunny, south-facing wall is recommended as a planting spot (Martin and Chris's plant is sited against the house wall) although the plant can, it is said, be grown on the fringe of woodland or in a sheltered border. Thus, I will have to think hard before buying edgeworthia, but at least I should now be spared further embarrassment whenever I come across it (or perhaps not if it isn't in flower!).

