

BERRY BEAUTIFUL

Tim Longville

Towards the end of summer and into autumn, shaded woodland areas can easily begin to look tired and lack interest. That's the time when plants with good berries come into their own and, in a small garden such as mine, modest-sized plants with good berries are particularly desirable. Two genera which are not often seen, but some members of which I find make a very effective low-level contribution, are the triosteums and the coriarias. Members of the former genus are sturdy, hardy and trouble-free; those of the latter are fussy and, in terms of hardiness, tantalisingly tiptoeing along the edge of feasibility.



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Triosteum pinnatifidum

There are six species of triosteum. All are herbaceous, three species coming from North America, and three from south-east Asia. I grow two of the three Asian species: *Triosteum pinnatifidum* and *T. himalayanum*. The genus is sometimes described as coarse or even weedy but I think that description must apply to the three North American species, of which I have no experience. (Maybe a North American member can confirm or deny this, and perhaps explain why the North American species are apparently and mysteriously known there as horse-gentians?)

Certainly, it would be a severe critic who could so describe my two Asian species, both of which make effective clumps of boldly cut foliage, growing here to no more than a couple of feet high. Admittedly the flowers are insignificant, but the subsequent berries – strictly, drupes – of both species (white in *T. pinnatifidum*, red in *T. himalayanum*) are produced in profusion, last for a long time (birds here show no interest in them), and if not precisely eye-catching are nevertheless quietly attractive. An added advantage is that they are anything but fussy plants in terms of soil or situation. Any generally 'woody', semi-shady, reasonably moist situation seems to suit them, though the richer the soil, the more vigorously they will perform.

The genus *Coriaria* is much bigger and much more varied, its fourteen species including shrubs, sub-shrubs, climbers and even small trees, from places as widely separated as the Mediterranean, South America, New Zealand and Southeast Asia. Its members are also much more demanding in terms of the conditions required for success. Indeed, many are indisputably too tender for most, and possibly any, British gardens. Even the two Asian species I grow – *C. japonica* and *C. terminalis* – need a warm, moist, shady corner if they are to flourish. At least, that's true here in the north-west, on the Cumbrian



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Coriaria terminalis var. *xanthocarpa*

coast, though by way of encouragement the great Victorian gardener, Canon Ellacombe, apparently grew *C. japonica* with spectacular success in his garden at Bitton in South Gloucestershire.

Both *C. japonica* and *C. terminalis* are arching sub-shrubs, reaching to no more than a foot or two high, and in my garden both tend to die back to their rootstock over winter, so it's always something of a relief to see the new foliage appear each spring. The foliage is not only attractive in itself (delicately dissected and almost fern-like in *C. japonica*; sturdily oval in *C. terminalis*), it also colours very effectively in the autumn. As with the triosteums, their nothing-special flowers are followed by quite-special berries: those of *C. japonica* being coral-red, ageing to almost-black, and those of *C. terminalis*, a strange shade of amber-yellow. Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones at Crûg Farm can tempt you with these and several other Asian species, and I have just tempted myself by noticing that Top Seeds NZ (www.topseeds.co.nz) offers seeds of ferny-foliaged, black-berried *C. plumosa*, which can be found on both North and South Islands, so might just about be feasible in the warmer corners of the UK.

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