

## XANTHORHIZA SIMPLICISSIMA

*Sue Hough*

Known by the common name of 'yellowroot', *Xanthorhiza simplicissima* also goes by the synonym *Xanthorhiza apiifolia*. This name was used by E.A. Bowles in his 1914 book, *My Garden in Spring*. He wrote:

*On a gusty day in spring at Myddleton House near Enfield, this woody shrublet which was growing in my rock garden had not been affected by the wind, due to its interlacing, suckering root system which is amazingly yellow in colour. Its tassel-like flowers of reddish purple appear in March - April and come before the leaves'.*

In 1773, William Bartram, who was a notable naturalist and botanical artist, embarked on a four year journey, sailing from Philadelphia to Buffalo Lick, Georgia, USA. On his journey, William kept a journal, and in June of that year, he wrote:

*I discovered growing on the bank at the bottom of a creek, a very curious little shrub. It resembled the Aralia, but had the most remarkable yellow tincture in its roots. It stood about 2 feet high with slender smooth white bark, but when scraped shows bright yellow underwood, which I thought might be useful in the process of dyeing'.*

*X. simplicissima* is one of the few plants in the Ranunculaceae family to have a woody stem, the other being clematis. It is not a common plant; in the RHS Plant Finder, only 9 nurseries listed it this year [2017] as compared to 15 in 2013. Technically it is a sub-shrub, and is fairly low-growing with a mounding habit, reaching between 20 - 70cm in height. The leaves are made up of five sharply lobed, toothed leaflets and the leaf scar is narrow, nearly circling the stem and giving it a segmented appearance.

The foliage emerges bronze-purple, changing to bright green as the season progresses; in autumn, the leaves change again to yellow and by winter they are deep red and tan. The flowers begin upright, but then droop into panicles 5-15 cm long. These plum-coloured flowers shade into chocolate brown, making it not a showy plant, but an interesting one, especially during March and April, when they create a purple haze prior to the leaves developing.

If you dissect the name, *Xantho* means yellow and *rhiza* means root, hence: yellowroot. These roots contain the alkaloid berberine, which gives the plant its characteristic yellow colour and bitter flavour. Berberine contains anti-



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*X. simplicissima* flowers, March



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Emergent foliage of *X. simplicissima*

microbial factors which inhibit bacteria, fungi, protozoans, viruses, roundworm, pinworm and other larger intestinal parasites. The Cherokee Indians used it as a remedy for haemorrhoids and sore eyes, and chewed it to alleviate sore throats and mouth problems. It can be made into a tea, which is yellow and bitter, and it can be used as a topical wash or compress.

The Native American Indians used it to produce a yellow dye and, in Jill Nooney's book *Arnoldia*, she describes, 'when silk is dyed with the root it takes on an attractive yellow, but when used on cotton or linen, the yellow turns an olive green when exposed to sunlight'.

This is a long-lived plant and, when the notable English plant collector, E.H. Wilson, saw it growing in the Arnold Arboretum, he thought it was one of the finest deciduous ground cover plants at the arboretum.

## X. SIMPLICISSIMA IN MY ESSEX GARDEN

*Sue Lander*

I have been growing *X. simplicissima* for many years, having first spotted it while on an HPS holiday, growing on a bank under the shade of trees in a very dry spot. It drew much attention, as it looked unusual and was not widely known. I then saw it in the garden of the late David Barker; his garden in Danbury, Essex, where he held his National Collection of *Epimedium*, was very dry and planted with many trees. It must have been from David that I acquired this plant, and it has been growing in a shady spot, under a pine tree, sharing the space with a *Fatsia japonica*, giant fennel, *Disporopsis*, and other shade lovers that can cope with difficult conditions.



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***X. simplicissima* retains its leaves throughout autumn, turning from yellow to red and purple as temperatures drop**

The plant is starting to spread very gently for me, but it is slow because of competition nearby and anyway, I wouldn't want it to take over. However, if you have a shady area where you would like good cover, it is ideal. The early, brownish-purple flowers are fairly insignificant. It is a quiet but interesting plant that not many people are aware of. It is worth growing if your garden is dry, as it copes with this situation well.

~ Both articles first published in the *Ranunculaceae* Group Newsletter, Spring 2017 ~