

# Choisya

6 February 2019, by Miranda Kimberley

These evergreen, aromatic shrubs work well in gardens, parks and amenity schemes, writes Miranda Kimberley.



*C. × dewitteana* Goldfingers = 'Limo'- all images: Floramedia

Utterly ubiquitous but still a great contributor to the amenity landscape, Choisya remains popular. New foliage forms have been created in recent years, lending the stalwart shrub a modernity that makes it still a very useful and attractive plant for gardens, parks and amenity schemes alike.

Choisya are evergreen, aromatic shrubs from Mexico and south-west USA. There are nine species, in the family Rutaceae, characterised by glossy, leathery, green compound leaves that are digitate and have three-to-13 leaflets depending on the species. Star-shaped white flowers, usually with strong scent, are produced in spring, summer and sometimes later.

The best known species in cultivation is *C. ternata* Award of Garden Merit (AGM), also called "Mexican orange blossom" because it has fragrant blossom similar to Citrus. It has strong green leaves and is a robust, extremely frost-resistant shrub. While it may suffer scorch or dieback, it never dies outright. From this species the still popular yellow foliaged Sundance was borne, giving an excellent colour contrast against darker-leaved plants.

When Peter Moore, then propagator at Hilliers and now at Longstock Park Nursery, crossed *C. ternata* AGM with *C. arizonica* he produced the hybrid *C. 'Aztec Pearl'* AGM, a fine variety with much narrower foliage in a lovely bright green. The flowers were larger, with a pink flush in bud and on the petals.

Moore has been breeding for 37 years and continues to produce new varieties. He created the soft yellow *C. Goldfingers* = '*Limo*' (PBR) in 1998 and *C. White Dazzler* AGM in 2004, the arguably improved version of *C. 'Aztec Pearl'* AGM that also has narrow leaflets, is said to have the best fragrance and is smothered in flowers in spring and autumn.

Choisya breeding continues to improve the foliage, aiming to produce shrubs that are attractive all year round, even when not in flower. Golden-leaved forms are still being developed, including the delicate *Royal Lace*. *C. Apple Blossom*, the first form with bicoloured flowers, with white and pink petals, has recently been produced.

Choisya likes an open but sheltered spot and light loam soil. While they cope well with pruning, it is best to site them where they can assume their mature size, if possible. *C. ternata* AGM and its cultivars are hardy plants that will cope outside all year round, bouncing back from frost dieback on the tips. The hybrids between *ternata* and *dumosa*, *C. × dewitteana*, are equally frost-hardy but can be slightly less robust.

*C. dumosa* and other lesser-known species are generally only able to be grown as pot plants inside a greenhouse or conservatory. Give them a loam-based medium in a large clay pot and place them in direct sunlight, storing them in cool glasshouse conditions over winter.



*C. ternata Sundance = 'Lich'*

### What the specialists say

Peter Moore, plant breeder, Longstock Park Nursery/Bred By Peter Moore, Hampshire

"I consider Choisya to be one of the best evergreen shrubs available to gardeners, growing in acid or alkaline soils, sun or shade and most aspects, unless very windy or a frost pocket. The variety that stands out for me is *C. 'Aztec Pearl'*, the first hybrid of the genus that I raised in 1982, when I crossed *C. ternata* with *C. arizonica*. My plant breeding portfolio stemmed from the success of *C. 'Aztec Pearl'*."

"Every spring since I have been breeding Choisya. *C. Goldfingers = 'Limo'* was raised in 1998 and in 2004 the award-winning *C. White Dazzler = 'Londaz'*. This is possibly one of the best for scent, although all Choisya are scented. 'Londaz' is completely covered in flowers during spring and autumn."

"It has been endorsed by some of Europe's top plantsmen and marketing agents. Bob Brown, on BBC Gardeners' World, gave it 10 out of 10 for the best flowering and hardest of the Choisya. It is also one of the main plants in a display bed at the entrance to Hillier Gardens. Peter van Rijssen of Plantipp wrote that 'Londaz' has been selected as top

shrub in the Dutch Topheester collection, tested for garden performance.

"There are now several golden Choisya listed in the RHS Plant Finder and I believe the recently introduced C. Royal Lace = 'PMoore06' from Lowner's Nursery is a good contender. 'PMoore06' has delicate, golden to lime-green lacy foliage and it did not burn in the summer heat of 2018. With neat and compact growth, it slowly reaches 100x75cm, with a mass of fragrant white flowers in spring. It can be grown in a border but would look fantastic in a blue glazed pot on the patio."

*Liz Hughes, marketing manager, Provender Nurseries, Kent*

"Choisya are a valuable plant for wholesale nurseries to stock as they are popular with landscapers and garden designers' clients as an easily recognisable plant. They also tend to be great performers — they have evergreen foliage, scented flowers in abundance and are attractive to wildlife.

"We have found that the smaller-leaved varieties have risen in popularity in the last few years, in particular C. × dewitteana 'White Dazzler', which is a relatively new introduction and is perfect for the smaller garden. The pink buds open to reveal a huge number of small white flowers that Choisya are so well-known for."



*C. × dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl'

## In practice

*Elisabetta Clementel, head gardener, private estate, Surrey*

"It is a genus that I think is out of fashion for designers but it must be taken into consideration when working on a garden that will have little to no proper maintenance. Pointless to choose fancy plants that no one is able or has the time to keep up. Choose a Choisya instead and forget about it. Moreover, non-gardening people love it.

In winter and early spring, when everything is bare, a *C. ternata* at the back of the border has an excellent hue of green, providing a background to winter and spring flowers. In spring, a *C. ternata* Sundance will shine like the sun with its new leaves. Late spring and summer they will be all covered in white fragrant blooms, but for a touch of pink in the buds, choose *C. 'Aztec Pearl'*. In the autumn, Choisya will be your silent helper, providing shelter for perennials as well as being a plant that needs no pruning.

"Gertrude Jekyll recommended Choisya as a wall shrub. Plant a variety like *C. ternata* Sundance alongside *Ceanothus* so its rich blue flowers contrast strikingly with the acid yellow-green foliage.

"Another bright and impactful combination would be provided by a Choisya next to *Cytisus × praecox* 'Allgold', with its delicate sprays of yellow flowers on green stems. Try the compact *C. Goldfingers* against *Ruta graveolens* 'Jackman's blue', whose yellow flowers match the Choisya's leaves perfectly."



*C. × dewitteana* *White Dazzler* = 'Londaz'

### Species and varieties

*C.* 'Royal Lace' = 'Pmoore06' (PBR) is an interesting new hybrid that has delicate lacy foliage. Lime-green to golden, dependent on the growing stage, it produces masses of richly scented white flowers in the spring, turning the plant into a white mound. Needs a bit of shelter, and support through any winters below -10°C, until established. Height and spread: 1m.

*C. ternata* AGM (H4) is a rounded, medium-sized, bushy evergreen shrub. It has dark,

glossy green leaves divided into three broad leaflets that are aromatic when handled. It produces clusters of fragrant white blooms in April and May, and often again later, even in winter sometimes. Height: 1.5-2m. Spread: 2-2.5m.

*C. ternata* Moonshine = 'Walcho' (PBR) is a sport of *C. ternata* that was found in 1992. It features broader leaflets and larger flowers. Height: 90-120cm.

*C. ternata* Sundance = 'Lich' AGM (H4) is a medium-sized, evergreen shrub of rounded habit. Its aromatic leaves have three leaflets and are glossy bright-yellow, becoming pale-green later. Clusters of fragrant white blooms in April and May, sometimes later. Height: 1.5-2m. Spread: 2-2.5m.

*C. × dewitteana* Apple Blossom = 'Pmoore09' is the first bicoloured *Choisya*, with lovely pink and white flowers. Its dark-green leaves are finer even than 'Aztec Pearl' or 'White Dazzler'. It has a compact shape, which makes it ideal for a smaller garden. Height: 1.2m. Spread: 60cm.

*C. × dewitteana* 'Aztec Gold' (PBR) is a free-flowering, bushy, evergreen shrub. It has the narrow leaflets of 'Aztec Pearl' with the yellow colour of Sundance. Clusters of fragrant, white flowers appear in late spring and again in late summer to autumn. Bred from 'Aztec Pearl' by Alan Postill for Hillier Nurseries. Height and spread: 1.2m.





### *C. ternata*

*C. × dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl' AGM (H4) is a small evergreen shrub of open rounded habit. It has aromatic, shiny, bright-green leaves made up of three-to-five narrow leaflets. Clusters of pink-flushed buds open to fragrant white blooms in May and again in late summer. Height and spread: 1-1.5m.

*C. × dewitteana* Goldfingers = 'Limo' (PBR) is a bushy, rounded evergreen shrub. Its narrowly elliptic leaves are bright-yellow when young, gradually turning pale-green as they mature or when they are shaded. Produces clusters of orange-scented white flowers in late spring and early summer. Height and spread: 1-1.5m.

*C. × dewitteana* White Dazzler = 'Londaz' (PBR) AGM (H4) is a compact evergreen shrub forming a neat mound, with aromatic, very slender dark-green leaves divided into finger-like leaflets. Exceptionally free-flowering, the sweetly scented white flowers appear in clusters during spring and often in late summer and autumn. Height and spread: 1.5m.



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