

# Sarcococca

21 December 2014,

There are plants thoroughly associated with winter: the Christmas tree, of course; the Poinsettia and Hippeastrum, given as presents at Christmas; and after Christmas the heralds of the coming of the spring, the snowdrop. One underrated evergreen, not the holly or the ivy, but the Sarcococca, needs to be more fully appreciated.



Known as the Christmas Box or Sweet Box, they are neat, evergreen dwarf or small shrubs with glossy, dark green leaves and fragrant flowers. Clusters of white flowers appear between the leaf axils between December and March – sometimes they have pink or reddish tips. Berries follow, varying in colour from black, to purple and red. These persist so that they are present when the new flowers are produced.

There are 11 species from South East Asia, China and the Himalayas, ranging from the largest at 2m tall, *Sarcococca confusa*, to the spreading ground cover plant *S. hookeriana* var. *humilis*, which makes a good alternative to traditional box edging. It suckers, like most of the species excepting *S. confusa*, but it can be easily controlled.

Other notable species include *S. ruscifolia* var. *chinensis*, a slightly smaller shrub than *S. confusa* which flowers profusely, all the way up the stem. It has nice, thick leaves and red berries which are popular with florists. Another nice species is *S. hookeriana* var. *digyna* which has narrow leaves giving it a graceful look, leading Graham Stuart Thomas to name it "one of the nicest small shrubs of this type that I know".

There is a form called 'Purple Stem' which has reddish purple flower buds and young stems. The less hardy species *S. saligna* has even longer, narrow leaves. This is one species whose flowers have little or no scent at all.

Sarcococcas can grow on a wide range of soils, including dry, chalky or acid, which makes them very useful. They can therefore cope with tricky spots such as dry shade and under trees with extensive roots. But they can also be planted in full sun, though then they will need more moisture in the soil. The hardiest species are *S. confusa*, *S. hookeriana* var. *digyna* and *S. hookeriana* var. *humilis*. *S. saligna* and *S. ruscifolia* are best suited to southern gardens or need to be given winter protection.

They can be planted to create a low hedge or used in the border as specimens or en masse to create a wave of fragrance. Being dense evergreen shrubs they can even be employed to disguise ugly areas, such as dustbin or bicycle stores. And they can be extremely effective grown in pots, perhaps alongside some flowering heathers, placed in a prominent position when they come into flower in the winter, to brighten up the front of a house or patio.

### What the specialists say

#### Adam Dunnett, Sales and Marketing Director, Wyevale Nurseries, Kent

Sarcococca is often grown for its attractive evergreen foliage and flowers, which add interest during the winter months. There are 11 different varieties of Sarcococca and a particular favourite of ours is *Sarcococca hookeriana* 'Winter Gem', which is a hybrid form of *Sarcococca digyna* 'Purple Stem' x *Sarcococca humilis*, bred by Peter Moore. 'Winter Gem' has inherited the best features from both of its parents including purple stems and a dense habit.

This particular variety adds an abundance of interest to any garden during winter and into spring. It is an upright variety with large, dark, glossy evergreen foliage and beautifully scented small white flowers, which are in bloom from late winter until April.

In late summer and autumn the flowers are replaced by shiny red berries that ripen to black. It is perfect for growing in borders, containers or as a low growing fragrant hedge. 'Winter Gem' responds well to trimming in order to maintain its dense, compact form. We

suggest lightly trimming or pruning back shoots after it has flowered in order to maintain its naturally compact form. Then add a 5-7cm layer of mulch or well-rotted compost around the base of the plant.

**Karan Junker, owner, Junker's Nursery, Somerset**

Sarcococca are brilliant plants. Naturally woodlanders, they thrive in a shady site. The pretty (usually white) flowers are sweetly scented and brighten a winter's day. Most Sarcococca flower in January or February but *Sarcococca orientalis* is earlier, typically peaking before Christmas. *Sarcococca ruscifolia* 'Dragon Gate' is a delightful selection, found by Roy Lancaster, which has a more compact habit and dainty little leaves. They are generally easy to grow in the garden. When some forms are grown in commercial numbers under protection red spider mite and scale can pose problems.

**In practice**

**Elisabetta Clementel, garden maintenance operative, Landscape Associates, Middlesex**

Sarcococca are pleasant and elegant small, evergreen shrubs. They are fully hardy, resistant to pollution, and unfussy plants, thriving in any kind of well drained, rich or normal soil, even chalky ones. They withstand dry shade, showing no signs of distress even in the summer months, and they do not need any particular care, except a good mulching every one or two years.

Their suckers might become invasive, which I do not consider a bad thing, but if you do dig them up and cut them using a sharp spade, enjoy their growth, which is not too fast anyway.

The honeyed fragrance of the flowers and glossy, dark emerald green leaves of Sarcococca make them suitable for many areas of the garden. Their dense, bushy habit makes it a good edging plant for short neat borders. In this case choose *S. hookeriana* var *humilis*, which reaches only 60cm high and is an excellent ground cover plant.

A bigger species, *Sarcococca confusa*, is excellent as a dwarf hedge thanks to its dense spreading habit, reaching around 2m height and spread. It is also the only one with non-suckering habit of this list and therefore a less invasive choice.

Since they thrive in dry shade they can be underplanted in groups beneath large shrubs and trees of winter interest, like *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida'. The slow growing *S. ruscifolia*, with ivory white flowers in late winter and early spring and deep red berries, is a good choice for this. Another interesting use of Sarcococca is to keep it clipped in simple topiary forms, like cubes. This is especially effective used in combination with denser

topiary plants as *Buxus sempervirens*. Keep the two shrubs at different height to avoid an awkward appearance of the softer *Sarcococca* shrub compared to the sharp box.

### Species and varieties

*Sarcococca confusa* or Sweet Box is a bushy evergreen shrub with glossy, deep green, wavy ovate leaves, highly scented, creamy-white flowers in winter, followed by glossy black berries. Non suckering. Height and spread 2m.

*S. hookeriana* var. *hookeriana* is a suckering evergreen shrub, forming a compact thicket of upright stems. It has leathery, lance-shaped leaves and tiny, fragrant white flowers in late winter, followed by black berries. Height: 60cm-1m.

*S. hookeriana* var. *digyna* is a small, suckering evergreen shrub with green or purplish stems, narrowly lanceolate mid-green leaves and clusters of small, creamy-white, fragrant flowers. Its berries are black. It is smaller and hardier than var. *hookeriana*.

*S. hookeriana* var. *digyna* 'Purple Stem' is a suckering, evergreen shrub which features new shoots flushed with purply-pink colour, which gradually fades as the stems mature. It has slender, dark green leaves and fragrant, pink-tinged white flowers in winter, followed by blue-black berries. Height and spread: 1.5m.

*S. hookeriana* var. *humilis* is also known as Dwarf sweet box. It's a compact, densely branched shrub, suckering to form extensive clumps featuring narrow, glossy green leaves, with small clusters of very fragrant pink-flushed white flowers with crimson anthers in early winter, followed by black berries. Height: 60cm.

*S. hookeriana* 'Schillingii' has narrow leaves which give the whole shrub a willowy appearance and masses of highly scented white flowers in all the upper leaf axils from Feb-April, prettily tipped with red-purple. Height: 1m.

*S. hookeriana* 'Winter Gem' is a new hybrid form crossing *S. hookeriana* var. *digyna* 'Purple Stem' with *S. hookeriana* var. *humilis*. It has larger than average leaves, which are a glossy, rich green and highly scented white flowers with pink anthers in winter that are followed by red berries that ripen to black. Height and spread 1.5m.

*S. orientalis* is a small upright shrub with stout green shoots. Its fragrant white flowers appear before Christmas and are sometimes tinged pink and followed by black berries. Discovered as recently as 1980 in China by the legend Roy Lancaster.

*S. ruscifolia* is a small, slow growing evergreen shrub with thick, dark green, glossy leaves

and small, highly fragrant, white flowers in late winter appear followed by dark red berries. Height 1.5m.

*S. ruscifolia* var. *chinensis* is more vigorous than the straight species. It is often confused with *S. confusa* because it also has longer, slender pointed leaves.

*S. ruscifolia* var. *chinensis* 'Dragon Gate' is a dwarf, evergreen shrub which has a much smaller leaf than even *S. hookeriana* var. *humilis*. It flowers in mid December with masses of fragrant small white flowers. Height and spread 60cm.

*S. saligna* is a small evergreen shrub with erect stems. Its narrow, dark green leaves are longer than those of other species. Its greenish white flowers flower earlier than most other species.

*S. wallichii* is a robust species with large, elliptic, glossy bright green leaves that have pointed tips. It grows up to 3m tall in the wild. Produces sweet smelling white flowers in the upper leaf axils from October to January, followed by p. Height: 1.8m.



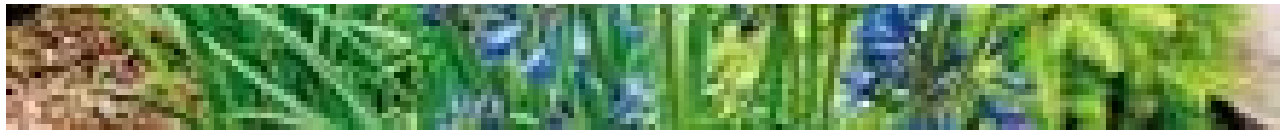
## READ THESE NEXT



### Abelia

Glossy leaves and fragrant flowers can provide welcome colour at bleaker times of the year, Miranda Kimberley finds.





## Agapanthus

These exotic plants are easy to grow and a great addition to any garden in pots, beds or borders, says Miranda Kimberley.



Which plants will UK nurseries showcase at this year's National Plant Show?





### Opinion... Experience should not be undervalued



### Opinion... Strategy needed to boost production

We face a great opportunity to increase the UK's production of nursery stock, but it will not be exploited without a strategic plan.





Opinion... quality shines out at industry events