

DAPHNE

By Merylyn Condon



The daphne family (Thymelaeaceae) comprises about 50 species of evergreen and deciduous shrubs originating in Europe and North Africa to temperate and subtropical Asia, though in Australia we don't see too many of these. Other plants in the genera which you may be familiar with include Edgeworthia, Pimelea and Dais.

The daphne we usually grow, pictured above right, is renowned for its highly scented flowers, though some in the genus have no fragrance. On the whole, daphnes are neat, compact plants, well-suited to a rock garden, and at home with camellias, rhodos and similar plants. What the small flowers lack in size, they often make up for in quantity, for many species produce showy heads of blooms in shades of white, cream, yellow, and pink during winter or spring.

Some daphne (*d. mezereum*, *d. laureola* and *d. gnidium*) were once used medicinally, though given that all parts of these plant are poisonous, it is questionable whether their use would have improved the patient's health! But don't let that word 'poisonous' deter you, for many of our best plants are poisonous, and daphne is a genus which has much to offer and is well worth growing. It is wise to remember that some people experience dermatitis when handling some daphnes, so take the normal precautions and wash your hands thoroughly after touching them. If small children visit your garden, then the berried species are probably best avoided or potted and kept out of reach.

Daphne species vary in habit and may be erect, rounded, or spreading, but the majority of species are evergreen shrubs, forming neat compact bushes. The deciduous plants have less heavy-textured foliage. The showy rounded heads of small flowers open from mid-winter to late spring, depending on the species, and are usually in delicate shades of white, cream, yellow, or pink and *d. genkwa* has lavender flowers. The fruit that follows the flowers may be very colourful, ranging from white and pink to red and purple.

Daphnes generally prefer moist, cool, humus-rich, well-drained soil, and are best placed where the plant will receive morning sun and protection from the hot afternoon sun, though depending on the individual species, some are more sun-tolerant, but generally, small-leaved species prefer light conditions, while larger-leaved species need some shade from the hottest sun. Once established, the plant will need to be mulched well and the roots undisturbed.

Maintenance consists of a simple trim to shape after flowering, or better still, pick some sprigs of daphne and fill your home with perfume, and at the same time you will be giving your plant the tip pruning it needs to keep it growing well. The plant can be fertilised at that time with a good all-round fertiliser. Daphne can be propagated from fresh seed (species) and by cuttings (soft tip or semi-hardwood cuttings) or layering.

PROBLEMS: There are a few things to be aware of:

- Sometimes daphne can suffer root rot as a result of over-watering, and that will cause the leaves to hang down and look particularly sad. We gardeners tend to indulge daphne by watering it, but better to ignore it sometimes and allow it to dry out between watering. Keeping the plant mulched will help keep the roots cool. (Yates Anti Rot® is useful if your daphne has root rot.)
But, if the leaves of your daphne are pale green and hang down, this can also be an indicator that it needs some fertiliser.
- If the leaves are bright yellow, that may be an indicator of an iron deficiency, remedied by a foliar spray of sulphate of iron.
- If over or underwatered, daphne can become stressed and that's when insects such as scale will move in. Scale insects are small shelled creatures that appear on or beneath the leaves, and on the stems. Make a habit of checking your plants regularly, and if you find some on the daphne, but not too many, then they can be squashed, but if they have built up their numbers, then you should spray with Eco-Pest oil or a similar product to smother them. Check a few weeks later, and if the shells have not become papery and dry, give the plant another spray.

Daphne virus used to be common but proper hygiene and better plant propagation methods by growers means that you will rarely see a modern daphne with virus, though it is still possible if you take cuttings from an affected plant.

Here's a short list of daphne, starting with those more readily available and ending with some which are well worth growing. Some occasionally appear in garden centres, and we have offered some at our shows on the plant stall. Yamina Rare Plants seems to be the only grower to list a significant number of daphne species and cultivars, and having visited Canberra last year for the Australian Open Garden Scheme's Plant Fair at Huntly, it is hoped that they may return for the next fair which is to be held at Lambrigg, Tharwa on the weekend of 27th and 28th March 2010. Merrygarth, a beautiful garden at Mt. Wilson, is worth visiting, both for its beautiful gardens and for their plant nursery, especially for those who covet interesting daphnes. Bundanoon Nursery is another venue for those seeking that special daphne plant.

Daphne odora – One of the best known and most desirable of all flowering shrubs. It is native to Japan and China and is an evergreen shrub growing to between 1 and 1.5m.

Daphne odora 'Marginata Alba' – Has yellow-edged leaves and a delightful scent. *D. odora 'Alba'* Pure white flowers and scented flowers. *D. odora 'Aureomarginata'* - Leaves have a thin margin of creamy yellow.

Daphne x burkwoodii – A hybrid derived from *D. cneorum* and *D. caucasica*. Light pink fragrant flowers in small dense clusters on a compact bush of 60-90cm. *D x burkwoodii 'Variegata'* – Has pale yellow leaf margins.

Daphne genkwa – Native to China and deciduous, it has lilac flowers along leafless branches in early spring and grows to 90cm. In acid soils, it will need extra lime to thrive. A compact form is sometimes available.

Daphne bholua - An upright evergreen to semi-evergreen suckering shrub to 2m or more with sweetly scented flowers which fill the air with perfume in early winter. The flowers are reddish-purple in bud opening white. *D. bholua 'Jacqueline Postill'*. This has larger flowers, which are more pink and showy than the species. Another winter bloomer with outstanding perfume.

Daphne cneorum (the Garland Flower) – A suckering dwarf shrub displaying very showy bright pink scented flower heads in spring. Neutral to acid soils. *D. cneorum 'Variegata'* – A vigorous form with cream-edged leaves and bright pink scented flowers.

Daphne collina - Slow growing dwarf form with glossy rounded leaves and beautiful rose-purple scented flower heads in spring.

Daphne longilobata – An evergreen shrub to 2m with open growth, narrow leaves and scented white flowers in summer.

Daphne mezereum – A small sturdy deciduous shrub which has massed purplish flowers on leafless stems in early spring. Lime should be added to acid soils for best results.

Daphne x napolitana – A compact shrub usually less than 1m with narrow leaves and rose-pink scented flowers in spring or summer.

Daphne pontica – A small shrub with large dark green, shiny leaves and spidery yellow-green flowers and a spicy scent. This daphne grows well in dense shade.

Daphne sericea – A small shrub with narrow leaves, pale pinky-mauve scented flowers and orange fruit.

Sometimes rare daphnes appear on the Horticultural Society's plant stall, so watch for our four flower shows. The daphne aren't there for long, but if we had lots, they would not be treasures!