

Lan Su Garden Plant Talks
Osmanthus 桂花 (guì huā)
Elizabeth Cha Smith (01/20/2018)



Moon Magic: Osmanthus in Chinese Culture

In the Chinese calendar, osmanthus is the flower for the eighth month, and its blooming coincides with the Mid-Autumn Festival when the fall harvest is winding down and when the moon is especially big and bright. During this festival, Chinese people enjoy lovely osmanthus steamed cake, fermented osmanthus wine, osmanthus tea, osmanthus flowers, and other dishes with osmanthus flavorings.

Some families set up a small table laden with fresh fruits, sweets, and lit candles as a sign of sacrifice to the moon for the prosperity of one's family. It is also a time to gather family to see the full moon from your backyard while recalling legendary stories about the moon goddess Chang'e (嫦娥), the immortal folklore figure Wu Gang (吴刚), and Yutu the jade rabbit (玉兔). I don't know what you see in the face of the full moon, but Chinese see Wu Gang trying to slowly cut down an osmanthus tree without knowing that it is self-healing. In this story, the jade rabbit Yutu, who is a pet of the moon goddess Chang'e, steals Wu Gang's lunch pail which causes Wu Gang to stop chopping and run after Yutu. This story continues while the moon completes its orbit, so on the next full moon we see Wu Gang trying to chop the tree down all over again!

One would think that modern Chinese people wouldn't be all that attached to long held legends about the moon, but these traditions are still very much alive even among the young and tech savvy. In 2013, the Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA) held an online poll to find some names for its first unmanned lunar exploration mission. Through popular vote, the spacecraft was named "Chang'e 3" and the lunar rover craft was named "Yutu".

The eighth lunar month is also the time when Chinese imperial exams were traditionally administered (sometimes in Suzhou). After young men took these exams their families became anxious about the results and tried to capture the great achievement of passing by saying that anyone who had passed had "plucked the osmanthus from the Moon Palace".

The full moon is a magical being and awe inspiring like the millions of stars we see in the sky. One can't help but to be mesmerized by the wonders of the full moon, so it is no wonder that the Chinese have worshipped and celebrated the full moon for so many centuries.

Osmanthus in Lan Su Yuan

Our Garden has eight species of osmanthus out of the 35 that are found world-wide in many temperate zones in China, Japan, North America, and Mexico.

I would like to cover all eight species in this paper as they all share many common characteristics but have differences that can help us distinguish them from each other. They all belong to the oleaceae (olive) family and are all evergreen. They all have four-lobed or petalled flowers that are very fragrant and are mostly white or creamy (some are also orange). All osmanthus leaves are borne on 'opposite' sides of a stem directly across from each other (unlike holly leaves which can look confusingly similar). Others have teeth at their margins when they are young which become smooth when they age, and some are elongated. One unusual species in our Garden has tips that are 'rotund'. All osmanthus are winter hardy and do well in slightly acid soil in sunny and partly shady areas.

In each section below, I start with the common name and follow with more detailed information.

Holly Tea Olive Shrub

Botanical Name: *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Sasaba' ("say say ba" is bamboo in Japanese) (*hetero* is Greek and refers to having two or more leaf styles).

Garden Highlights: The Holly Tea Olive shrub found in Bed #19 against the back wall of the Boat-like Pavillion is over 5' tall and 3' wide (but can grow to be 8' tall). The striking part of this upright plant is that the whole plant is full of glossy, dark green leaves that are triangular and deeply cut with very stiff and razor sharp tips. You will see creamy light veins running through the middle and edges of all leaves. It flowers in late winter and is highly fragrant. "Olive" in the common name means the fruits are very much like the edible olives.



Fragrant Olive or Sweet Tea Shrub

Botanical Name: *Osmanthus fragrans* 'f' *Aurantiacus* ("aw-ran-TY-ak-us" means orange colored) (the 'f' is for 'form' and means it is a form of Osmanthus tree with orange flowers).

Garden Highlights: The Fragrant Olive or Sweet Tea shrub is found in Bed #23 and is the most popular garden plant in China due to its intoxicatingly fragrant flowers (blooming in April or so). It is also the most fragrant flower in our Garden. It is over 10' tall upright and has several trunks. The oval leaves are about 4" long, leathery, and finely toothed. The flowers of this species have been used for scenting tea and as hair ornaments. Extract from the gold-orange flowers from a closely related species (*O. fragrans* var. *thunbergii*) costs around \$4,000 per kilogram.



Fragrant Tea Olive

Botanical Name: *Osmanthus fragrans*

Garden Highlights: The Fragrant Tea Olive osmanthus in Bed #1E is a replacement for the old *Osmanthus heterophyllus* var. that was in our Courtyard of Tranquility.

Another Fragrant Tea Olive is the tall one being held up with thin ropes against the wall in Bed #20N. Both plants are multi-trunked and have several spreading branches that are trying to go upward. Its leaves are simple (not divided into leaflets), oblong-lanceolate (2" to 4" long), sharp tipped, and the undersides are distinctly veined.



Fortune's Osmanthus

Botanical Name: *Osmanthus x fortunei*, 'variegatus'

Garden Highlights: This species was named after the professional Scottish plant hunter, Robert Fortune, who was dispatched to China in 1842 by the Royal Horticultural Society. Our Fortune's Osmanthus lives in Bed #21 to the left of the dwarf contorted black pine. It is a hybridized species that inherited leathery, holly-like dark green foliage from *O. heterophyllus* and a strong fragrance from *Osmanthus fragrans*. It has several trunks borne close to the ground with upper branches full of small leaves that are oval and taper pointed with sharp teeth that become smooth as they mature.



Round Osmanthus or False Holly

Botanical Name: *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Rotundifolius'

Garden Highlights: You will find this rare and fascinating plant in Bed#20N right behind the giant leaved rhododendron, *Rhododendron sinogrande*, and to the left of the *Phoebe chekiangensis*.

The best way to identify this plant (5' tall and 5' wide) is through its tips which are 1-2" long, 1" wide, and unusually ovate round or 'rotund'. The compact form has many long branches which bend down and have tiny buds that are just barely visible right now. They are often bisexual with the female reproductive organ sitting below the male organ in a single flower.



Delavay Osmanthus

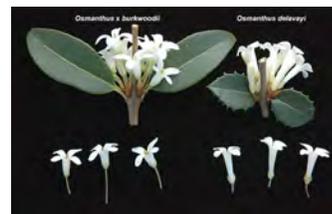
Botanical Name: *Osmanthus delavayi*

Garden Highlights: The first *O. delavayi* in our Garden is in Bed #EC2 right by the dedication plaque. It can grow to 10' tall and has long twigggy branches with small leaves with thorns. Right now, some flowers buds are visible.

The images to the right show how the flower tubes of the *O. delavayi* are longer than other osmanthus flowers and have tops that bend backward sharply or are 'reflexed'.

The second *O. delavayi* is quite small and lives in Bed #9E in the Fragrance Courtyard. You can find it just to the left of the Moon Gate and beside the taller *Chimonanthus praecox*.

O. delavayi is named after Jean Marie Delavay (1834-1895), the first French Jesuit missionary plant collector who collected countless plants in the northwestern Yunnan where he also found osmanthus in 1890. It is known that all the European *Osmanthus delavayi* are descended from the seeds Delavay shipped out of Yunnan until a Scottish plant hunter acquired more osmanthus seeds from Yunnan after World War I.



Conclusion

Several years ago, our Head of Horticulture, Glin, referred to our osmanthus as a “signature tree” in our Garden. I hope this plant talk helps us all to see that osmanthus, with their humbly small but strongly fragrant flowers, are indeed significant culturally, botanically, as well as economically for the Chinese. In a scholar’s garden like Lan Su Yuan, the osmanthus should remind us of the Confucian texts that young men had to study for their imperial exams each fall in hopes of “plucking the osmanthus from the Moon Palace”. Our osmanthus should also be evocative of the Mid-Autumn festival and remind us of how Chinese celebrate the full moon with traditional Taoist legends about Chang’e and her jade rabbit, Yutu, while enjoying osmanthus cake and wine!

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