

Devoted to daphne

The bewitching scent of daphnes hangs heavy in the winter air, making them an essential plant at this time of year, says John Hoyland

THOSE few courageous plants that have evolved to brighten grey winter days with colourful flowers tend also to be heavily perfumed, releasing their fragrance to compete for the attention of any pollinators hardy enough to be around. Of the winter-scented shrubs, the stand-out stars are from the genus *Daphne*. Long-flowering, floriferous and full of fragrance, they are at their best, and most desirable, in the winter and early spring, although some members of the family will provide colour and scent throughout the year.

In the wild, daphnes are native to Europe and Asia and form a family of evergreen and deciduous shrubs that range from squat hummocks a few inches tall to magnificent specimens that reach 6ft–7ft tall. The blooms are formed of clusters of small tubular flowers that create a dome and usually grow on the end of the plant's stems. Botanists will point out that the flowers have no petals and are formed from four coloured sepals, but gardeners will be more interested in their beauty. Some species produce flowers that are greenish yellow, although, most commonly, they appear in shades of pink and purple. The few that are not fragrant are, unsurprisingly, rarely seen in gardens and bring little to the party, so are probably not worth searching out.

Growing tips

Choose a place in the garden that is sheltered from cold winds and partly shaded. Daphnes will grow in full sun, as long as the roots can be kept in shade

Well-drained, open soil that contains lots of organic matter is essential. Don't plant them in either bone-dry or waterlogged soils

After planting, spread a thick layer of mulch around the plant, leaving a gap a few inches from the stem. Repeat the mulching each spring with copious amounts of compost

Do not prune daphnes: it is unnecessary and could encourage part of the shrub to die away

The shrub's name honours the water nymph who, to escape the amorous pursuit of Apollo, was magically transformed into a tree that was thereafter worshipped by the god. There are plant collectors as enamoured of their daphnes as Apollo was of his. My own love affair with the genus began one crisp, chilly day in the Cambridge University Botanic Garden, where I was bewitched by an overwhelming perfume, heavy and sweet without being in any way sickly. I tracked it down to a tall shrub a dozen yards away labelled *Daphne bholua* 'Jaqueline Postill'. The cultivar was raised at Hillier Nurseries, Hampshire, in the early 1980s and has proved to be relatively long-lived and easy to grow, making it a good choice for gardeners new to growing daphnes. The deep-pink buds open to paler flowers and cloak the evergreen foliage from December to March. Nurseries have introduced many cultivars with similar flowers, usually grown from wild-collected seed.

‘Daphnes are not sociable plants and are happiest not crowded by others’

As would be expected from its name, the flowers of *Daphne odora* are as perfumed as those of *D. bholua*. Smaller, more compact and neater than its cousin, it has spawned several cultivars, often with variegated evergreen foliage. There are few naturally occurring hybrids, but plant breeders have produced several excellent ones, usually with *D. odora* and *D. bholua* as the parents. *D. 'Perfume Princess'* is a recent offspring of this union that has rapidly become popular in garden centres worldwide. The result of a painstaking selection process by New Zealand plantsman Mark Jury, it forms a mounded plant smothered in palest-pink, almost white, blossom.

Daphne hybridising in Britain dates back to the 1920s with the appearance of *Daphne* →

Long-lived *Daphne bholua* 'Jaqueline Postill' flowers from December to March









Facing page: The deep-pink flowers of *Daphne mezereum* appear on bare stems in February and March, with the leaves following.
Above: *D. odora* 'Aureomarginata' is a sturdy form with a creamy edge to the leaves that turns white and purplish-pink flowers

x burkwoodii, a semi-evergreen hybrid that flowers in May and June. There are now many forms, all of them with honey-scented flowers. Another hybrid from the period, *D. x napolitana*, has also spawned several clones. The original type, now sold under the name of 'Enigma', is the most impressive, blooming profusely in March and then intermittently until the autumn. The perfume is strong and spicy and has been, unkindly, likened to cheap after-shave.

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Specialist nurseries often offer rarer, smaller species, such as *Daphne cneorum*, *D. alpina* and *D. arbuscula*, but these can be temperamental and difficult to grow, so are probably best left to enthusiasts and admired on the benches of alpine garden shows or in the glasshouses of botanic gardens.

Daphnes are not sociable plants and are happiest planted in places where they are not crowded by other shrubs or perennials. Pick a spot close to the house, so that they can be appreciated without having to trudge across the garden. Select their home well, because most daphnes are deep-rooted and, once planted, they are almost impossible to move. →



Unusual yellow-flowered *D. pontica* blooms in April and May, with black berries later



Above left: *Daphne* 'Perfume Princess', a popular new cross between *D. odora* and *D. bholua*. Above right: *D. x transatlantica* 'Eternal Fragrance' blooms in May and on and off until October. Facing page: The flowers of *D. x burkwoodii* 'Somerset' open in late April

‘Growing daphnes is a lesson in enjoying the garden in the present moment’

In general, daphnes are not long-lived shrubs and most will survive a maximum of eight to 10 years, although cultivars of *Daphne bholua* and *D. odora* can reach 15 years before they start to decline. Sometimes the demise is shockingly rapid; sometimes a sickness that lingers over a few seasons. It is in the nature of gardening to want to save plants and it is hard not to be despondent when a plant dies. No amount of nurturing, however, can restore a dying daphne: the only thing to do is to thank the plant for the years of pleasure it has given and to plan for what will replace it. Growing daphnes is a lesson in enjoying the garden in the present moment and not over-worrying about what might happen next season. 🌸

Delightful daphne

Daphne bholua 'Jacqueline Postill'

Deservedly one of the most popular and widely available daphnes. In flower for a couple of months after Christmas, it has large flowers that are sweetly scented, even on cold days. Hardier than some species, it remains evergreen in all but the harshest winters. Once established, it will grow to between 6ft and 8ft tall

Daphne mezereum A deciduous shrub that grows into a dome about 3ft tall. Purplish-pink flowers cluster along bare stems in February and March before the leaves push through. The red berries that follow the flowers are poisonous to humans, but not to birds

***Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata'** One of several forms with variegated foliage. Here, the leaves have a narrow cream margin that turns white with age. The plain-green form has a reputation for being sickly, but this cultivar is far more robust and more hardy. It grows to about 3ft tall

Daphne pontica Most daphne flowers are shades of pink or purple, but this species has trusses of greenish-yellow flowers in April and May, followed later in the year by black berries. Slow-growing, it will eventually reach 3ft tall and is best in cool, deep shade

***Daphne x transatlantica* 'Eternal Fragrance'** One of the most floriferous members of the daphne family, this hybrid erupts into bloom in May and continues to sporadically produce flowers through to October. The foliage is evergreen and it will eventually grow into a dome about 3ft tall

***Daphne x burkwoodii* 'Somerset'** The tips of every stem of this hybrid seem to have clusters of flowers, which start in late April and continue for a couple of months. Mostly evergreen, this daphne will shed some of its leaves in very cold winters. The name honours the brothers Albert and Arthur Burkwood, British plant hybridisers during the 1920s

