

***Heptacodium* – A Plant Providing Seven Times the Beauty!**

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On numerous occasions, I have heard homeowners question the worthiness of hiring a professional to help with designing their garden. After all, what could be so challenging about arranging plants? One challenge for me was understanding the flexibility of large shrubs, whose stature can approach heights of 20'. Typically, they relegate to the tasks of screening unattractive views or creating the “walls” for an outdoor room. Yet, for several shrubs the act of removing the lower limbs magically transforms the plant into a small tree, often exposing beautiful bark as a bonus. Several plants come to mind, but one of the best candidates is Seven-Son-Flower or *Heptacodium miconioides*.

Seven-Son-Flower is a member of the Honeysuckle Family or Caprifoliaceae and is monotypic, meaning the genus only has one species. It is a native of China and like so many garden-worthy plants, it has an interesting history of how it arrived in our gardens. Its most notable discovery was by the renowned plant collector Ernst Henry Wilson (1876-1930) in 1907. He only found two specimens perched on cliffs nearly 3,000 feet in elevation in the Hubei province of Western China. He called the plant *Heptacodium*, honoring the whirl of six flower buds surrounding what appears as a seventh bud. (Right) *Hepta* is from the Latin for seven while *codium* refers to a poppyhead since the radiating lines atop a poppyhead resemble the flower structure. Wilson sent the specimens back to the Arnold Arboretum where botanist Alfred Rehder (1863 – 1949) published the genus and species in 1916. Rehder selected the specific epithet (species) from the physical similarity to the tropical genus *Miconia*.



Interestingly, Wilson was not the first to “find” *Heptacodium* in the wild. In 1877, William Hancock (1847-1914), an Irish botanist who served as an agent for the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service found a plant near 3,000 feet in Eastern China. He sent dried specimens to Kew, the Royal Botanic Garden in England where they remained, presumably unnoticed until 1952. The English botanist Henry Kenneth Airy Shaw (1902-1985) took notice of the herbarium sheets and believing the specimen to be unique from that described by Rehder, he named the species *Heptacodium jasminoides* as the flowers do resemble Flowering Jasmine.

It was not until November 1, 1980, that American botanists, at the Hangzhou Botanical Garden in Eastern China, saw a living plant and collected seed. The collection was part of the Sino-American Botanical Expedition, with a plant exchange between China and the United States. The botanists sent seed to the Arnold and National Arboretum, which in turn shared small plants with the New York Botanic Garden. It was from these three Arboreta that the nursery trade finally introduced the plant under the name *Heptacodium jasminoides*. As mentioned, *Heptacodium* is a monotypic genus and in

2011 it became apparent the two species were, in fact, one and the same. In such instances, the initial name becomes the accepted name and Rehders' name prevailed.



For designers and homeowners, the challenge with new introductions does not focus on the botanical name but on determining how best to use the plant. Growing 20' tall and 15' wide, the American trade introduced *Heptacodium* as a large upright shrub. (Left) However, in China, they describe it as a small tree with an arching branching habit! This is a plant whose shape and use in the garden are truly determined by its training. Rather awkward in youth with stems growing at irregular angles, it is best to thin plants to at most four dominant stems that show promise for not rubbing.

Although the dark green foliage is attractive, the main summer attribute is the floral display. During July, the flower buds appear at the tips of the stems, but they merely serve to tantalize the gardener since they do not open until late August! The fragrant white flowers are, individually, only ½" in diameter, but they produce amply and glow against the dark green foliage. They appear in whirls of six. What appears like a seventh unopened central bud is an extension of the floral stem rather than a flower bud.

As the flowers fade the calyx, or the outer set of protective leaves that initially covered the flower buds, gradually enlarges throughout October and turns red. They become highly ornamental and give the appearance of bright red fruit clusters, as displayed by the accompanying 20-year-old plant. Each bright red calyx sits atop a single seed, which also turns red with time. Although the wind distributes seeds, seedlings are rarely seen and, in my experience, I have only seen one seedling!

Not to be outdone by the floral display, the bark also has a magnetic appeal for gardeners. (Right) As the stems and trunk expand, the medium brown to gray-brown bark exfoliates in long thin papery strips, revealing a light tan inner bark. Removing the lower limbs to expose this very appealing bark is a great reason to grow the plant as a small tree. Consider planting it outside a room with a prominent winter view or next to a major path, allowing you to appreciate the bark year-round! Best in full sun, plants are reliably hardy from zones 5-9 and are incredibly tolerant of various soil types and pH levels.



The potential of large shrubs for enhancing the garden sadly remains unrealized by many gardeners. Considering how best to display the ornamental attributes of a plant occasionally requires different thoughts on how to prune and position a plant in the garden. It took me a long time to understand the versatility of plants like Seven-Son-Flower – a plant that provides the garden with seven times the beauty of many other large shrubs when pruned and sited properly.