The Alternatives

Lonicera sempervirens (Trumpet honeysuckle)

Planting Lonicera sempervirens in place of the invasive Lonicera japonica is a far better choice for your home landscape and the local ecosystem. L. sempervirens is a woody vine native to the southeastern United States. Due to this plant’s native range, it is heat adapted and can easily survive Northeast Ohio’s humid summers. It is also one of the tougher invasive species; in addition to its tolerance of heat, it is deer resistant, and drought tolerant, according to North Creek Nurseries. L. sempervirens has vibrant orange to scarlet trumpet-shaped flowers, which is where it gets its namesake, trumpet honeysuckle. The scentless, flowers bloom from mid-June to August and produce bright red berries in the fall. Both flowers and berries are showy and colorful enough to see from a distance. If you can believe it, there are cultivars of L. sempervirens that have even more brightly colored flowers. "There are so many cultivars now," Tubergen said. "Some of them we even sell at the Arbortrust’s Plant Sale in May." In addition to L. sempervirens’ horticultural value, this plant has wildlife value as well. The bright red flowers attract hummingbirds and provide them with a sweet nectar meal. With L. sempervirens’ quick growth rate and similar characteristics to L. japonica, this better behaved native honeysuckle will make a practical ground cover in the home landscape, and can be confined to a small trellis or fence rather than running rampant. Examples of this plant can be found in the Paine Rhododendron Discovery Garden, the Display Garden and the Holden Butterfly Garden.

Clematis virginiana (Virgin’s bower)

It’s not an easy task to find a native vine as showy and beautiful as the honeysuckles. However, Clematis virginiana’s beauty rivals the beauty of the popular Lonicera species. C. virginiana is a native, perennial vine that is widely available via mail order, and in some garden centers and nurseries. It has scentless, floret-shaped flowers on a vigorous, fast-growing vine. C. virginiana’s blooming season is in June and short, lasting a little over a month, but when it does bloom, it does so abundantly and elegantly. The blossoms are followed by fluffy seedheads that are very attractive, adding an additional ornamental quality to the plant. “It’s pretty in flower and pretty in seed,” said Roger Getty, Director of Horticulture and Conservation.

C. virginiana is most commonly confused with C. terniflora (sweet autumn clematis), its invasive Asian relative. An easy way to differentiate the two species is to examine their leaf margins. C. virginiana’s leaf margins are toothed while C. terniflora’s are smooth. Because of its rapid and smothering growth habit, C. virginiana is best planted where it has a fence to climb and cover, and separated from less vigorous plants.

The Holden Arboretum’s plant collections curator, recommends that there are many non-invasive alternatives to plant in preference to L. japonica. Birds can disseminate the seeds, so planting it anywhere outdoors near woodlands was it has not already been established leads to problems unless the fruit is removed before they ripen.

Clematis virginiana (Virgin’s bower)

Clematis virginiana flowers. John D. Byrd, Mississippi State University, Bugwood.org

Clematis virginiana. John D. Byrd, Mississippi State University, Bugwood.org

Lonicera sempervirens flowers. John D. Byrd, Mississippi State University, Bugwood.org

Lonicera japonica ‘Halliana’ (Japanese honeysuckle vine)

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