

The Gold Medal Award of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

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The purpose of my talk is to introduce you to the Gold Medal Plant Award of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. You may be familiar with this under its original name, the J. Franklin Styer Award of Garden Merit, named after the Pennsylvania nurseryman who provided the impetus and the initial funding to create the program.

How did this come about? Dr. Styer had always believed that plants should receive the same kind of recognition as people in the horticulture field. Many really superior plants, both old and new, were ignored by the buying public for lack of widely available information about their merits. So in 1978 he made a grant to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) to develop an awards program to identify, evaluate, and promote outstanding but under used woody plants. Ernesta Ballard, then president of the Society, asked Jane Pepper, then of the Haverford College Campus Arboretum, to head up the Styer Award Committee.

Members for this new committee were chosen foremost for their enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, woody plants. The 15 or so landscape architects, botanical garden professionals, nurserymen, educators, and fine gardeners who comprised the first committee brought to the evaluation process not only their own experiences but varying viewpoints. This helped assure that eventual award-winning plants would have wide appeal not only because of obvious ornamental traits (the "gotta have it!" urge) but also because they performed well in mass production and in landscape settings (the "it roots on a wet sidewalk and survives in a planter at McDonald's" phenomenon).

Plants receiving the Styer Award had to be free from serious pests or cultural problems, be somewhat but not widely available in the trade, show promise of being **distinct** improvements over similar plants and show potential for broad landscape use in the mid-Atlantic region (an area roughly from New York City to Washington, DC). Also, potential award-winners could not be eligible for an award from another society (for example, the Rose Society), as it was felt that additional evaluation and promotional efforts were not needed for these categories of plants. It was intended that the award be given only to woody plants.

The initial process involved two stages. Plants were submitted to the Committee by early December for consideration of merit. At a January meeting, those determined to be worthy of further evaluation for the Styer Award were given an Award of Preliminary Commendation. Submitters were required to distribute plants shortly thereafter to evaluators on the committee to grow and observe. After several years' evaluation, a consensus would be reached by the committee, and plant candidates were either given the Styer Award or dropped from the program. In this way large number of applicants could be weeded out early, while plants showing early promise would have to prove themselves superior over time to get the award.

Over time, modifications have been made to the program. In 1990 the Styer Award became the Gold Medal Award to help those not familiar with the program to grasp the award's intent. The composition of the Committee has shifted somewhat as original members have retired and new members with different areas of experience have joined. Other changes have greatly speeded the process. The requirement of growing and evaluating the potential award-receiving plants by committee members was deemed too time-consuming. Now at least three landscape-sized specimens of plants under consideration must be accessible (within 150 miles of Philadelphia) for committee members to observe. A second meeting, usually in early June, is now held at the Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College, whose collections usually contain specimens of potential award-winners. Voting is done at this meeting to determine Gold Medal winners for the upcoming year after viewing plants and subsequent discussion. Final suitability for the award is determined by a plant's being rated as outstanding in:

- **Cultural Considerations:** broad garden and landscape adaptability.
- **Commercial Factors:** ease of propagation, marketing, and economic feasibility of production.
- **Aesthetic Considerations:** overall appeal.

Any plant not meeting these standards does not receive the award and is dropped from the program.

Is the Gold Medal program a success? The staff of PHS has conducted surveys of its membership and commercial nurseries and garden centers. Results indicate that more than 90% of PHS members responding believe the program to be making a worthwhile contribution to horticulture in the Delaware Valley, and more than 75% have looked for Gold Medal plants when visiting area nurseries. PHS has been contacted by nurseries wanting to be listed as sources for Gold Medal plants, and several firms have indicated they use PHS's source lists to obtain propagating stock or plants for their own operations. In 1994, PHS received 550 requests for information about the program or its plants. Since 1988, 42 plants have received the Styer/Gold Medal Award; 86 have been rejected. Each year's winners are profiled in the January issue of *The Green Scene*, a PHS publication. There are now over 10 plants under consideration for future Gold Medal Awards. If you are a regular reader of *American Nurseryman*, you will find recent Gold Medal award winners profiled in the annual new plants issue.

You are strongly encouraged to contribute to this process of recognizing and promoting outstanding woody plants by submitting entries. Applications are available from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 325 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106 (Atten. Kathy Mills). You will need to submit approximately 5 slides illustrating specific qualities which you believe makes your plant superior and to cite locations of at least 3 landscape-sized specimens within 150 miles of Philadelphia which are accessible to evaluators for observation. It is also important to identify any sources you may know to help the committee assess potential availability. Remember that any woody plant not eligible for other awards can be submitted: species, cultivar, hybrid, old or new; the goal is to promote superior plants deserving greater use. Also note that while the Gold Medal Award Program targets the mid-Atlantic region, its award winners are equally valuable wherever they can be successfully grown. Please consider the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society a resource if you are now, or are considering, growing, selling, or buying

Gold Medal plants. Source lists are available as are slides for illustrating catalogs. I hope you will agree that these plants are not only fitting tributes to the vision of Dr. J. Franklin Styer but are truly first-rank additions to landscapes both in and out of the mid-Atlantic Region.

Editor's Note: Philip Normandy showed a series of slides of Gold Medal winners. Gold Medal winners shown included the following: *Aesculus pavia*, *Betula nigra* 'Heritage', *Callicarpa dichotoma*, *Cephalotaxus harringtonia* 'Prostrata', *Clematis* 'Betty Corning', *Deutzia gracilis* 'Nikko', *Halesia diptera* var. *magniflora*, *Hedera helix* 'Buttercup', *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Blue Billow', *Itea virginica* 'Henry's Garnet', *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth', *M.* 'Galaxy', *Malus* 'Donald Wyman', *M.* 'Jewelberry', *Prunus* 'Okame', *P.* 'Hally Jolivette', *Viburnum dilatatum* 'Erie', *V. nudum* 'Winterthur', *Zelkova serrata* 'Green Vase'.