

Hughie Jones – Feb. 2011

Azara microphylla

Box-leaf Azara, Chin Chin

One whiff, one warm, vanilla-scented waft that makes you stop and say – Where is that coming from? – and you remember *Azara microphylla* for life. That's what people say.

This is what Christopher Lloyd has to say about scent in general and this scent in 'The Well-Tempered Garden':

“My one-time music teacher, Kenneth Stubbs, who was also an expert gardener, used to classify flower scents into those that are moral and those that are immoral. The distinction, when you come to think of it, is quite clear. Moral scents include all those warm, foody, daytime smells, like coconut-scented gorse, clove carnations, vanilla *Azara microphylla*, mignonette, lupins, wallflowers, stocks and thyme. The immoral kind reserve their main strength, appropriately, for evening and night-time.”

I have yet to smell a box-leaf Azara in bloom. I think I am in for a real treat. In fact, I did not know this plant at all until I saw it in the Southern Hemisphere Garden at VanDusen. I was attracted to this small evergreen tree by its fine texture. It has dark green leaves held tightly on spray-like branches for an airy effect. Its glossy leaves are oval and toothed and the intriguing herringbone arrangement of branches is not unlike that of *Cotoneaster horizontalis*.

The best way to identify any species of *azara* is to look for leaves of uneven sizes on opposite sides of the branchlets. The smaller one is not a true leaf but a stipule or accessory leaf. To the untrained eye, it looks like there are two very differently shaped leaves attached at the same point. The evergreen leaves are alternately arranged along the stem. It is this arrangement of leaves that gives box-leaf Azara its outstanding textural qualities.

In late winter or spring, if you are lucky, you'll get to smell the 'moral scent' of box-leaf Azara. The tiny flowers have no petals – it is the yellow stamens that you see. These flowers are held in clusters in the leaf axils and are often half-hidden against the branchlets. But the vanilla scent is strong. For some people the scent is more like chocolate or even marzipan.

Box-leaf Azara is a good candidate for cool maritime or Mediterranean climates. In Chile, its natural habitat is cool and moist with lean soils. Being a narrow-growing evergreen tree, it is also a good candidate for a small garden feature - it grows to about 5 m (15 ft) tall and 2 m (6 ft) wide. *Azara microphylla* can be grown in sun or shade, but it is most elegant in light woodland and provides an excellent backdrop for bold-leaved plants.

Azara is a genus of twelve species of flowering plants in the family Salicaceae and is native to temperate to subtropical regions of South America. *Azara*

microphylla is the hardiest of the species - hardy to -15 C. This native of Chile and South Argentina grows in forests with *Nothofagus obliqua*. *Azara* was formerly classed in the family Flacourtiaceae.

In 1794 the genus *Azara* was named after Felix de Azara, a Spanish geographer and naturalist who did fieldwork in South America from 1781 to 1796. The species name *microphylla* (very small leaf) is from Greek. In Chilean (Mapuche) boxleaf *Azara*'s name is Chin Chin.

It is possible that *Azara microphylla* is pollinated by a moth. Night moths have been observed trapped in the flower. But there is no doubt that a tiny boreal marsupial called the 'mountain monkey' (*Dromiciops gliroides*) eats the fruit and distributes the seed.

I am thinking about planting it in my garden. Not many broadleaf evergreen trees have such dainty leaves. And then just looking forward to the scent to come would get me through winter.

Sources: <http://www.greatplantpicks.org>; <http://www.arthurleej.com> - Trees of Seattle; www.elsevier.com/locate/actoc ;The Well-Tempered Garden – Christopher Lloyd; Shrubs – Roger Phillips & Martyn Rix; The Explorer's Garden – Shrubs and Vines – Daniel Hinkley



flowers of *Azara microphylla*



fruit of *A. microphylla*



tiny boreal marsupial that eats the fruit