

Hughie Jones – Nov/2010

A Japanese Plant

Kirengeshoma palmata (yellow wax bells)

I've had *Kirengeshoma palmata* growing in my garden a long time. I bought it from Earth Rise in 1991. I also have *Kirengeshoma koreana* (*Kirengeshoma* Korean Group), which came from the UBC plant sale that same year. It's a native of South Korea.

When I was checking out *Kirengeshoma palmata* and *K. koreana* at VanDusen in the beds below the falls, some of the plants looked like they had the leaves of one species (*palmata*) and the inflorescence of the other (*koreana*). But it was the end of October and not the best time to be checking yellow wax bells.

Two species of *kirengeshoma* are currently recognized, and they differ only slightly. The nodding floral branches tell you right away that you are looking at *K. palmata*, whereas the stiff upright inflorescence is a sign of *K. koreana*. Also, the *K. palmata* flower never fully opens, while the *K. koreana* does. Over the years, my *K. palmata* plant has reminded me of a graceful Japanese bow, and my *K. koreana* plant of a samurai stance.



Kirengeshoma koreana



Kirengeshoma palmata

Then I read in Daniel Hinkley's book, 'The Explorer's Garden: Rare and Unusual Perennials', that in the early 1990's UBC Botanical Gardens successfully crossed the two taxa. None of the progeny showed enough improvement over the species to justify introduction into cultivation. Well, maybe VanDusen got to try out some of them.

Kirengeshoma palmata is native to the woods and mountain lowlands of the Japanese islands Shikoku, Kyushu, and Honshu. It also grows in similar habitat in China. The genus name is a Latinised version of the original Japanese name. 'Ki' means yellow in Japanese and 'renge shoma' the Japanese anemone (*Anemonopsis macrophylla*). The species epithet 'palmata' refers to the foliage - shaped like a hand. *K. palmata* is a late-flowering perennial up to 1.2 m high with arching stems and belongs to the hydrangea family.

Unfortunately, *Kirengeshoma palmata* is rare in its native habitat. The roots of this handsome perennial are a valued ingredient of traditional medicine in Japan and China, and it has suffered as a result. According to the IUCN Red List categorization, current global status is 'critically endangered'. That means *K. palmata* is facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future. The population has been severely reduced in number through habitat loss and fragmentation. This has been caused by logging, fire, plant hunting and feeding damage by deer.

Luckily, *Kirengeshoma palmata* is not a difficult plant to grow. It is hardy and not prone to pests or disease. But it needs to be planted where it will have lots of space to grow. If it is constricted, it will not flourish. *K. palmata* prefers a moist, leafy, humus-rich soil in partial shade – typical woodland conditions. Also, it is best planted where you can easily see it throughout the season – from leaf to arching black stems and nodding bud.

Kirengeshoma palmata suits the style of a Japanese garden. It is a subtle textured plant with well-defined, black stems and leaf veins. These set off both the pale yellow flowers and the pale green maple-like leaves. Its flowers nod and never quite open. Golden-variegated Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra* Aureola) and *Hosta nigrescens* with its black emerging shoots would complement *kirengeshoma*, making a nice contrast in shape and color as well as texture.

Once you see it, you'll want to grow it. And that's one more *Kirengeshoma palmata* in the world.

Sources: The Explorer's Garden – Daniel J. Hinkley; Perennials Volume 2 – Phillips & Rix; Journal of Plant Research Volume 120, Number 1 – www.springerlink.com/content/b0776n6205436628/ ; New Phytologist, Volume 183, issue 2, pages 480-495, July 2009 – <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469-8137.2009.02876.x/abstract>