

Styrax japonica
Japanese snowbell
Storax family (*Styracaceae*)

Styrax japonica is a small deciduous tree with lots of pluses - attractive form, foliage and flowers. The beautiful slightly fragrant blossoms dangle from its branches in May and June. The flowers help bridge the gap between spring blooms and the flowers of summer. Then it develops globular mint green drupes in the latter part of summer that hang on for months.



Styrax japonica in flower



drupes on *S. japonica*

Japanese snowbell is best planted where you can look up into and appreciate the show. The two mature *S. japonica* in bed 124 at VanDusen illustrate this well. The one across from the waterfall was planted in 1982 and the other on the trail in 1973. Also, you can see their flat-topped form and horizontal branches. This characterizes *Styrax*, making them nice looking in winter too.

This tree grows well in the Pacific Northwest. It's low on maintenance and is disease and pest resistant. In addition, it doesn't get out of hand. That's why the city of Vancouver often plants Japanese snowbell under wires. Besides, it is a beautiful tree – loved by the birds and bees too.

S. japonica likes neutral to acidic soil in sun or part shade. In the wild, it is a resident of the understory. That means protection from the wind is key. It also needs regular moisture but not overly abundant moisture.

The common name, Japanese snowbell, and species name, *Styrax japonica*, is misleading. It is native to Japan, where it was first collected by Western botanists, but it is also native to Korea, China, and Taiwan. With such wide distribution, it's not surprising that *S. japonica* is quite variable. The Korean snowbells are among the hardiest, and these may be the most adaptable to the growing conditions of the northeast.

The wood of *S. japonica* is used to build kokyū, the Japanese bowed instrument.

The fruits/drupes of Japanese Snowbell contain the poison *egosaponin*. When the fruits are crushed, its poison can stun fish if sprinkled on a pool of water. In the Orient, it is used as part of a traditional fish-gathering technique.

The species that yields storax is *S. officinalis*. It occurs in both California and Europe. In ancient times, its resin was used in Egypt for embalming, and it's mentioned in Exodus as the plant used for sacred incense. Medicinally it was said to be an antibiotic.

There are 130 species of *Styrax*. In VanDusen we have two of these - *S. japonica* and *S. obassia* (similar to *S. japonica* but with a much bigger leaf). It would be nice to have a *styrax* that is native to North America in our botanical garden. The American snowbell (*Styrax americana*) would thrive in VanDusen. And this is a plant whose habitat is disappearing.

At one time the pitcher plant bogs, moist pine barrens, grass-sedge bogs, or savannas occupied about 75 percent of the Atlantic and lower Gulf Coast plains, from Virginia to Texas. Today, less than 3 percent of this area remains untouched. This is the habitat of the American snowbell.

There is more chance of finding it in an east-coast arboretum or botanical garden than in the wild. It would adapt to our Northwest climate and grow happily along one of our streams in VanDusen Botanical Garden.



American snowbell (*Styrax americana*)

American snowbell likes partial shade, a moist area and protection from the wind. It reaches a height of about 3 metres and tends to shrubbiness.

Sources:

<http://whatcom.wsu.edu/ag/homehort/plant/snowbells.htm>

<http://arnoldia.arboretum.harvard.edu/pdf/articles/851.pdf>

Flowering Plant Families of the World – Heywood; Trees of Vancouver - Straley