

The Development of New *Abelia* Cultivars Through Interspecific Hybridization

**Sloane Scheiber, Michael Dirr and Carol Robacker
Department of Horticulture - Griffin & Athens, UGA**

Compact, pest resistant, flowering evergreen shrubs are in great demand in the nursery and landscape industries. *Abelia x grandiflora* meets these criteria with its long flowering period, from May to frost, and glossy semi-evergreen foliage (evergreen in mild climates). However, while it has an abundance of pinkish-white flowers, they are small and only mildly fragrant, and the plants are not hardy below -20°C or zone 6.

The genus *Abelia* contains approximately 30 species, but *A. x grandiflora*, its cultivars, and *A. 'Edward Goucher'* are the primary taxa grown. *Abelia chinensis*, a plant less commonly seen in cultivation, is a fragrant, perpetually-flowering shrub, but it is deciduous with an upright spreading open habit. Furthermore, *A. chinensis* is hardy only to zone 7, being killed back to the ground in cold winters farther north. *Abelia floribunda*, Mexican *Abelia*, is a wild evergreen species with a scandent shrub-like growth habit that has attractive, large, red flowers, but flowers only on old wood and lacks cold hardiness (hardy only to zone 8) Interspecific hybridization within the genus offers the potential for new cultivars.

Preliminary evaluations of 200 open-pollinated seedlings of *A. chinensis* indicated great variation in foliage and growth habit. Fourteen selections that exhibited desirable horticultural traits such as compactness and foliage variegation were chosen from the population for further evaluation. In March 1999, the fourteen selections were each clonally propagated and grown in three-gallon containers. Five clones of each selection were arranged in a completely randomized design.

Monthly height and width measurements were taken to determine growth potential. Pest resistance, flowering habit, and adaptability were assessed through visual observations. Based on superior compactness and early flowering potential, two of the fourteen accessions were chosen for further evaluation at additional locations.