

Among the native wildflowers of the Southeastern United States, among the vines, perhaps the most outstanding is the Carolina or Yellow Jessamine. It is known by the scientific name, *Gelsemium sempervirens*. This plant is not a true jasmine in spite of its name, *Gelsemium*, which is a Latinized version of *gelsomino*, the Italian name for jasmine. There is no doubt that the name 'Jessamine' comes from the scientific name. The pronunciation is the same but the spelling has changed.

None of this affects the popularity of this vine in the gardens of the humble to the grand gardens of the wealthy, wherever it can grow. Carolina Jessamine is limited by its cold tolerance. It grows fairly well in Memphis, Tennessee, but it is not hardy in St. Louis, Missouri. It is considered too tender for best results in Washington, D.C., where it is marginal at best. In the mid and lower South, hardiness is no real problem. It is happiest and most vigorous in the acid soil of the pine tree belt. Here it can grow up to 60 feet into mature pines on the forest edges. The vines must have some sunshine and good drainage to prosper. Carolina Jessamine grows well as an exotic in the alkaline soils of Arizona and California, where they are very popular garden plants. In its natural habitat, it grows conspicuously along woodlands that border country roads. They are a delight to the eyes and nose in late winter and early spring.

The blooms appear before dogwood trees, but frequently some blooms will linger until that time. Its generic name of *sempervirens* means nothing more than "evergreen" in plain English. It is termed evergreen, but the opposite leaves turn to a nondescript purplish color in the full sun of winter. The leaves are simple, narrow lanceolate, about one-fourth inch wide and two inches long. The flowers are bright yellow, numerous, and trumpet shaped with five stamens. The woody vine is easily managed, but it does have radiating runners from the soil level that root easily in sandy loam. One plant soon makes a small colony. The vines of Carolina Jessamine can easily be trained to grow on a fence, tree, arbor or trellis. The cascading vines in full bloom can be an outstanding sight in the garden or in its native woodland.

I have never seen anything but the bright yellow single flowers. Horticultural selections in recent years have produced the double clone known as 'Pride of Augusta.' I presume it was found near Augusta, Georgia. A pale yellow unnamed selection is listed by a few speciality nurseries. There is another entirely different, similar species, *Gelsemium rankinii*, of the Gulf Coast area. It grows in wet marshland areas, has no odor to the bloom and usually blooms in the cooler seasons. It is mostly a collector's item. Often the more common *Gelsemium sempervirens* will bloom again in the fall and into winter but it is always very fragrant.

*Gelsemium sempervirens* is a poisonous plant. It contains several active alkaloids that are toxic. The roots were used as a "kill or cure" medicine by the pioneers for terminally diseased people years ago, and it usually killed. I do not know the strength of the dosage. With all the undertaking of looking for some natural cure for diseases today, some of the laboratories are probably looking into any curative properties of this popular garden plant.

Small plants are easily transplanted. Larger plants are very difficult or impossible. Apparently, root ratio to leaf surface is important when moving this plant. Frequently I pull up small plants and directly pot them into the soil they were extracted from and water them and almost all of them live. With a little care, they can be trained on a piece of bamboo and I have no trouble giving the established (over a year) plants away to visitors. I find that they are drought and winter cold tolerant as potted plants in my climate. Apparently 0 F or below will damage the plants. I have never tried cuttings or seeds as I have

had no need. The dried seed pods can give interest to winter dried arrangements although the seed pods are usually erect in nature but are left hanging in arrangements.

When logging is done in the woods where Carolina Jessamine is found, the big vines are usually killed. There are many small vines that will soon take the dead vines' places. I suppose it could be used as a ground cover, but frankly, there are better ground covers. Where it grows, it is one of the most sought after native plants.

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