

ENJOYING STYRAX



Styrax japonicus

Matthew Lobdell wrote a major thesis in 2015 entitled 'Styrax in Cultivation: Evaluation of an under-represented ornamental genus'. He followed this up with a very much shorter, but no less informative, 2014 article under the same name in *The Plantsman*. This promoted me to put my, very much more amateur pen to paper, for the Cornwall Garden Society Yearbook in 2017 on the subject of 'Hardy Summer Flowering Snowbell Trees'.

One of the several great joys of *Styrax* species is that they usually seed copiously and are reasonably easy to germinate and grow on. As a result some of the rarer species are now being found and enjoyed more widely in UK collections. RCM Group seed distributions and Burncoose Nurseries have helped here.

For some people the Chelsea Flower Show is the highlight of their gardening year but, for Cornish woodland gardens, late May usually marks the virtual end of the spring season. Milder winters of late have meant that many of the *Aesculus* species are now early into their pomp in late May. What is left to perform in June are, of course, the *Styrax* species and an increasing number of interesting new clones and hybrids.

The only two species to regularly flower here in late April or May are *Styrax odoratissimus* and *Styrax hookeri*. In early June there are now 16 different species to enjoy and admire, originating from Asia, Europe and the Americas, which are now growing here at Caerhays. *New Trees*, published in 2009, made a play on supposedly new species of *Styrax* which had only recently appeared in UK gardens. This list included *Styrax faberi* and *Styrax serrulatus* which have been well established at Caerhays for, around, 30 years. *Styrax hookeri* and *Styrax formosanus* have been growing here for around a 100 years and are hardy new.

The other Wilson or Forrest introductions or purchases from the Chenault Nurseries in France from 100 or more years ago which grew here included also *Styrax obassia*, *Styrax wilsonii*, *Styrax hemsleyanus*, *Styrax odoratissimus* and, of course, *Styrax japonicus*. With the exception of *Styrax odoratissimus* all these other original plants died of old age in the last 30 or 50 years but were earlier replaced mainly by home grown seedlings which are now, again, mature trees.

While our oldest styrax at Caerhays are dotted about we have deliberately created new plantations of styrax in 2008 and again in 2016. The first of these plantations intersperses *Lithocarpus* species and a few May/ June flowering magnolias while the second is a mixture of just *Styrax* and *Stewartia* which are already fast developing into small trees. The objective, in both instances, was to now create areas in the garden which are at their best in June and merit a garden tour on their own. When we get close to our normal garden closing date in mid-June, and visitors sometimes complain at the lack of flowers to see, here is the obvious answer.

The purpose of this article is not to repeat long botanical descriptions of each individual species or cultivar but to encourage more gardeners to try a much wider range of these exciting and rewarding plants which are easy to grow in a woodland context.

I have listed the species in the order in which they flowered at Caerhays in 2024 while deliberately leaving *Styrax japonicus*, and it's now numerous cultivars, until last. There are said to be up to 130 species of *Styrax* in existence. We may now be growing around 25 in the UK.

1. *Styrax odoratissimus*

This is our only surviving centenarian *Styrax* species. The main trunk collapsed about 30 years ago and reshot vigorously from the base to re-emerge as a multistemmed clump of around 20 feet in height with a slightly greater spread. It was first measured by Alan Clarke in 1964 and has been a Record Tree for many years. *S. odoratissimus* has the largest leaf of any styrax species known at Caerhays and the flowers are in irregular, smallish, terminal panicles very early in the spring and, sometimes, even before the first leaves. The flowers have no scent. Tom Hudson's plant of this name at Tregrehan has rather different leaves and it remains to be determined if the Caerhays tree is actually *S. odoratissimus* or, rather, *S. vietchiorum* as we had always known it prior to the name change? Unlike most *Styrax* this one is not easy to grow from seed possibly because we fail to look to collect it early enough in the autumn.



2. *Styrax hookeri*

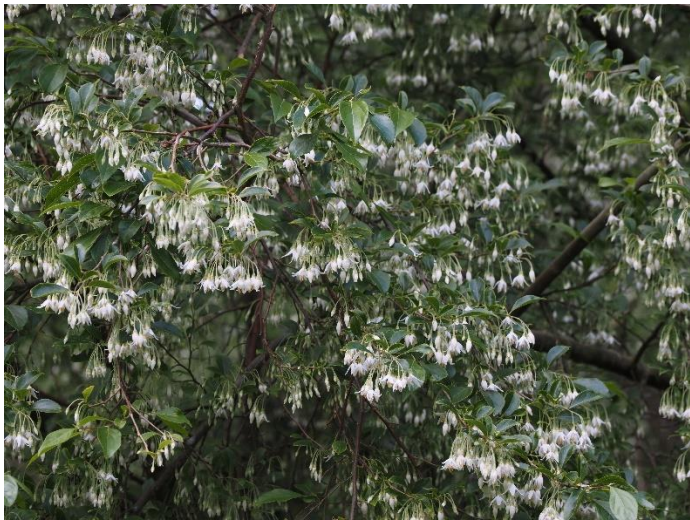
The original *Caerhays* tree of this species measured around 25 feet in height in 2006 but died shortly afterwards. It was very probably a Wilson introduction from 1905 although Forrest also introduced it from Yunnan in 1915. This tree has always set viable seed and Philip Tregunna, head gardener here until 1996, was wise enough to reestablish a number of seedlings which are now much the same sized trees as the original.

This is not the most floriferous of species and some might argue that the grey-brown blotching on the bark of the trunk is better than the flowers themselves. The flowers appear singly, in pairs or, more occasionally, in small branched terminal panicles. They are unscented as you might expect for a species flowering in late April or, more usually, in mid-May. We continue to propagate this still rare species from seed although germination success can vary widely from year to year and germination is often the 'easy' bit in comparison to survival of the seedlings over the first winter.



3. *Styrax formosanus* var. *formosanus*

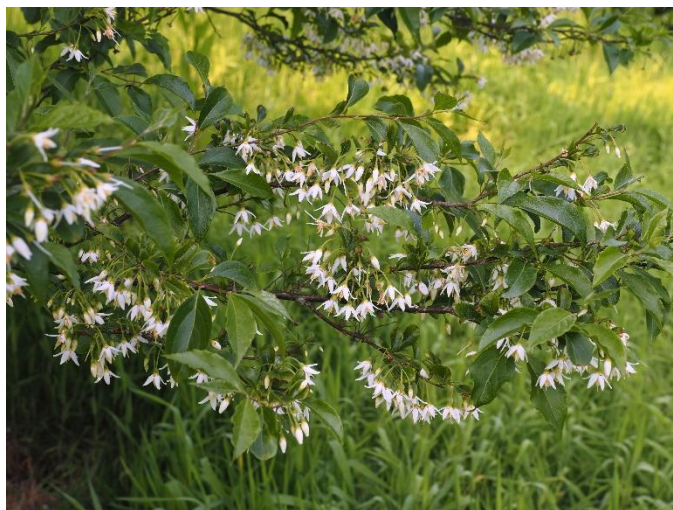
However floriferous a young *S. japonicus* tree can be it is readily and easily beaten by the astonishing floriferousness of *S. formosanus*. The trees do have the occasional year off from full flowering after very dry summers but, to my mind, this is a key plant to add to your garden if you do not already have it to admire. The flowers are usually at their best around 5-15th June and smell strongly of jasmine. They are a bit smaller than those of *Styrax japonicus* but in larger trusses. In a normal year there are more flowers on show than there are leaves on the whole tree although, as with many of the *Styrax* species, it is helpful to grow them on a bank above a path so that you can look up into the centre of the tree where the flowers are perhaps somewhat concealed. The trees at Caerhays are around 20 feet tall although only planted as replacements for the old original in 2008. They originated from Taiwan rather than China. After the flowers drop to the ground there can be a white carpet surrounding the base of the tree still buzzing with frustrated and satiated bees.



4. *Styrax formosanus* var. *hayataianus* (Synonym - *Styrax suberifolius* var. *hayataianus*)

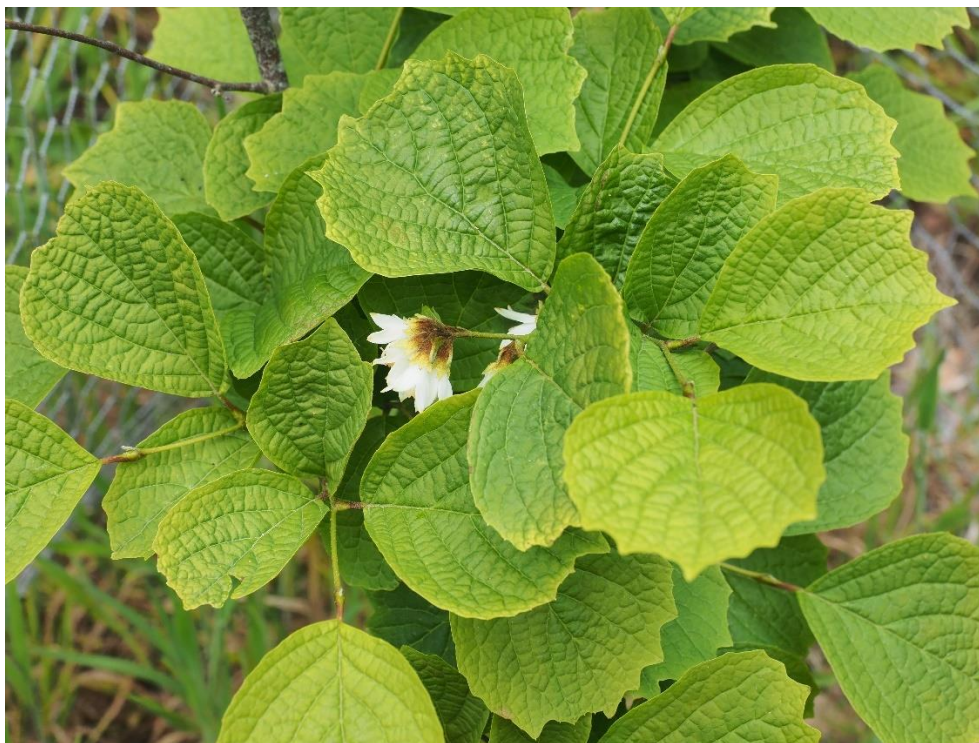
Our small trees are from Crug Farm collections in Taiwan. I am not competent to adjudicate on which specie name is correct so will stick with Crug's naming. The bark on this plant is different to *S. formosanus* var. *formosanus* and, although highly floriferous, it is not quite as plastered in flower. The flowers are not as pendulous or as scented and the leaves are larger, darker and glossier. With us *S. formosanus* var. *hayataianus* does not stay long as a tree with a single trunk.

Side shoots from the base of the trunk quickly establish themselves so that, very quickly, a must-stemmed tree takes shape needing plenty of side room to expand into. In the wild many *Styrax* species grow near water at the edge of the forest. As the original trunk ages and dies off so the clump continues to expand and regenerate itself. This species seems to demonstrate this very clearly and quickly here.



5. *Styrax shiraianus*

Two plants of this species have been growing on here since 2015 and first flowered in 2020. The leaves are very distinct and easily recognisable with an obovate shape and coarse tooting. The flowers are funnel shaped in short, and often terminal, densely hairy racemes in early June. So far it looks as though this Japanese species is going to grow into a multi stemmed shrub rather than a small tree. The new shoots are just as hairy as the flowers and the undersides of the leaves are downy which again makes this species very distinct and different.



6. *Styrax wilsonii*

This is a most attractive shrubby species which, in maturity, will develop multiple stems with dense twiggy branches and tiny ovate leaves. The original plant at Caerhays was only around 10 feet tall after around 80 years and its replacements, grown from our own seed, have readily grown to 5 or 6 feet in only 10 years or so. Flowering can be sparse in the early years when the flowers are small, delicate and initially in pairs at the tips of the twigs and side shoots. The size and scale of the flower clusters increases with age until the point where there are far more flowers than leaves in early to mid-June. Sadly there is little scent. This species is another which grossly over flowers and then over seeds. This probably shortens its life span. It is also unusual, and possibly unique, in having a small secondary flowering in late September or early October when the seeds are still not quite ripe. The reference book say that this is a more tender species but it has survived the very worst winters and coldest springs here including 1963 and 2018.



7. *Styrax obassia*

This is another not terribly well known or widely grown species from Japan which died of old age here only recently. We had however planted out a new crop of plants in the early 1990's which are now themselves mature. Of all the *Styrax* species which like to hide their flowers within the confines of the plant this may well be the worst. You usually have to look hard from under and up inside the crown of the tree to locate the long terminal racemes of very fragrant bell shaped flowers. From a distance you see nothing but, rather secretly, the tree can be quite floriferous in a good flowering year. This species has interesting bark, large rounded leaves and, with us, gives a very decent display of yellow autumn colour.



8. *Styrax hemsleyanus*

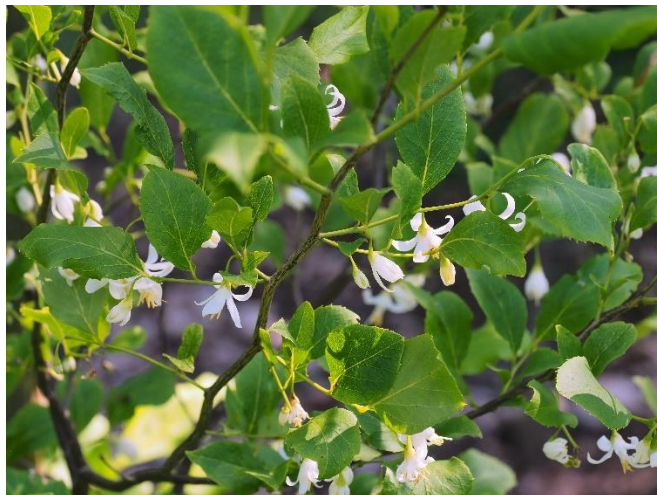
In 1971 the original Caerhays tree of this species was 40 feet tall with a girth of 2 1/2 feet. The large elliptic leaves are a bit like those of *S. obassia* but this is far more prepared to let you see its flowers from a distance and has different characteristics. The old plant eventually died here in 2003 and was replaced in 2008. It is already a good 15 feet tall with an upright habit and only a limited spread of 5-6 feet. Quite different from the spreading and dense *S. obassia*. The long terminal racemes of flowers appear in mid-June and have a pronounced central cone of yellow anthers. They are full out just as *S. obassia* starts to drop. With us this species has no appreciable autumn colour.



9. *Styrax americanus*

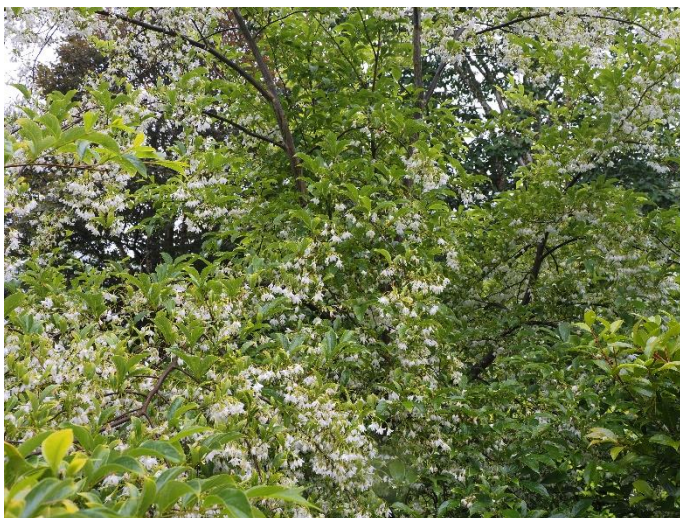
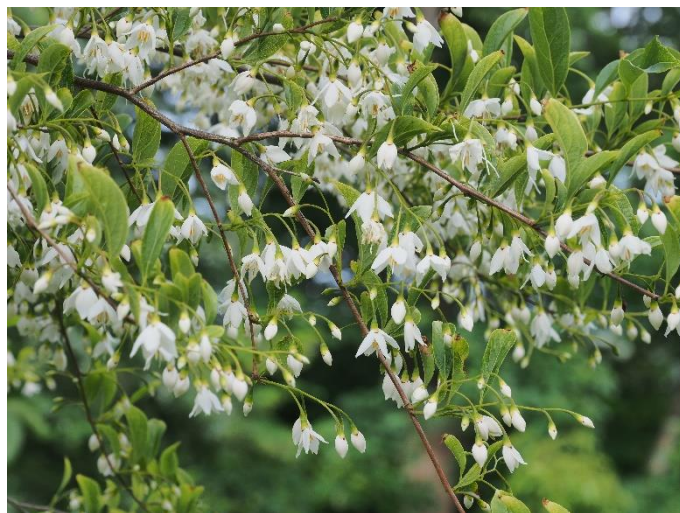
Just as the shrubby *S. wilsonii* finishes flowering *Styrax americanus* takes over in mid/ late June. This species is from SE United States and is very much a shrub rather than a small tree. It is easily identified by its narrow, oval, and toothed leaves and its flowers which have recurved petals. The flowers are in groups of one to four at the tips of the leafy twigs. Bearing in mind its location in the wild one would expect this to be somewhat

tender but so far this has not been a problem here. If there was dieback from a cold winter one would presume that it would reshoot vigorously from the base.



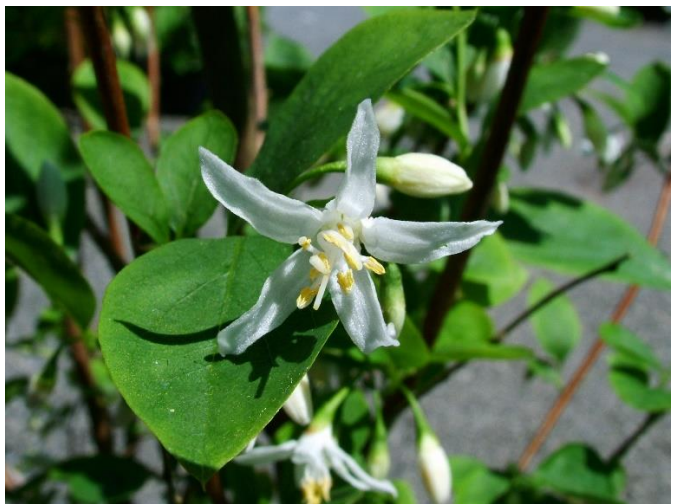
10. *Styrax wuyuanensis*

This is a rare quick growing species which has become a small tree here with slightly drooping branches. It has proved to be a fairly sparse flowerer and has only once in the last 10 years put on a really good show. The scented flowers are large by *Styrax* standards and have pronounced yellowish orange antlers. They appear in irregular terminal clusters under the branches with seven or nine or more flowers in each cluster in a decent flowering year. After the two very dry summers here there were virtually no flowers at all in mid-June 2024.



11. *Styrax officinalis*

Despite having been grown in Britain since the 16th century this species, which is native to Italy, the eastern Mediterranean, and Middle East is still relatively unknown. *S. officinalis* is the only European species and it is referred to as 'true' styrax; a source of gum resin. This can be obtained by wounding the stem and was used as an expectorant in medicine and as a perfume in sweet chains and bracelets. With us this species is more of a large shrub than a tree. It thrives in full sun in a sheltered location and flowers in late June with the flowers lasting on into early July. The flowers are scented and smell of citrus. They appear in terminal clusters of tree to eight flowers.



12. *Styrax grandifolius*

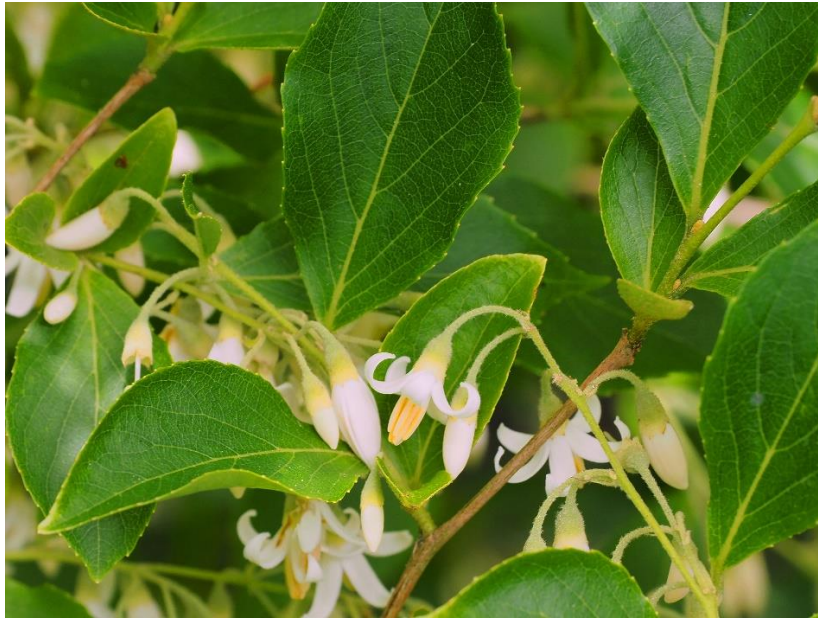
This species from the southern US states is hardly known in the UK and our plant is still only small. Nevertheless it has been remarkably floriferous as a young plant and is developing quickly into a small tree. The flowers are said to be in terminal racemes of single flowers or 5-20 flowers but larger flower clusters presumably come with age.



13. *Styrax faberi*

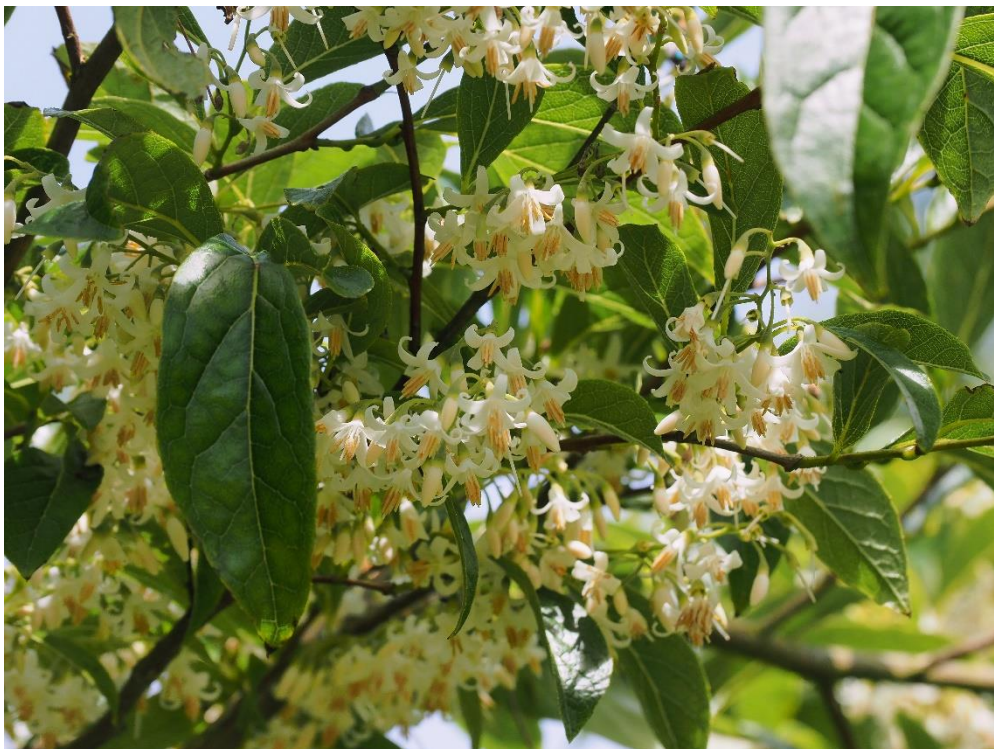
You can often see terminal flower buds in this species in May but it's not normally properly out in flower until early June. 'New Trees' suggest that it is a smaller growing shrubby species which originates from lower altitudes in southern and eastern China as well as Taiwan, and may therefore be tender. In reality our plant has developed into a tall spreading tree over the last 16 years and does not appear to be even faintly tender. The racemes of flowers in immaturity seem to have three to five flowers but, in more maturity, the flower numbers are much greater.

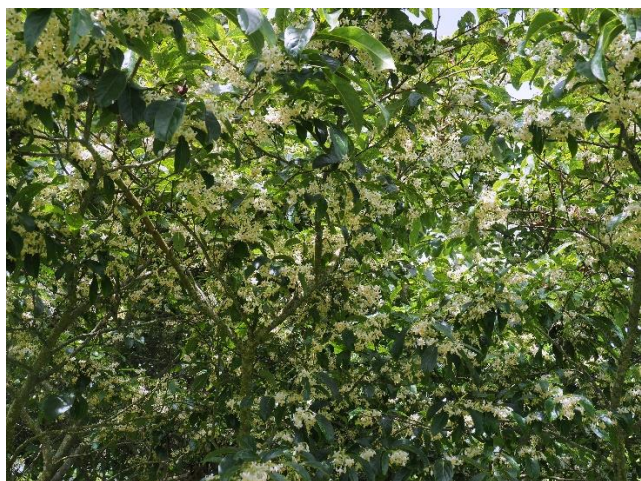




14. *Styrax serrulatus*

This species has a very wide range in the wild from Bhutan, India, China, Myanmar, Vietnam and Taiwan. Our plant was a gift from John Bond, Keeper of the Gardens at Windsor Great Park in 1991 after the 1990 hurricane here. It is still very rare in cultivation in the UK but is definitely one of the loveliest of the less well known *Styrax* species. With us it holds its leaves long into winter and could readily be mistaken for an evergreen. The tree grows in an umbrella shape and a little gentle uplifting has quickly encouraged vigorous shooting from the base of the trunk. The flower buds are evident in late spring but do not come out until early or mid-July. The massive terminal racemes of flowers do not have much scent but this is not a species which tries to hide its flowers within the tree as so many others do. It either sets seed copiously, or not at all, and we have yet to succeed in germinating this species unlike so many of the others.





15. *Styrax tonkinensis*

Tom Hudson, from Tregrehan, kindly gave us our first plant of this species in 2018. Incredibly if it already nearly 20 feet tall, has recently just split in half, and has yet to produce any flowers at all. The Tregrehan plants are much taller and the flowers in late July are very hard to actually see without binoculars. This speed of growth makes it a suitable tree for agroforestry or pulpwood. It retains its large leaves in a mild winter and may yet prove to be tender in a really hard winter.



16. *Styrax japonicus*

I have been arguing that *S. formosanus* var. *formosanus* is an ever more desirable woodland garden tree than *S. japonicus*. That is not to denigrate the amazing floriferousness, scent, and beauty of *S. japonicus*, nor its hardiness and popularity in the UK as the Snowbell tree. There are however an increasing number of newer named clones of *Styrax japonicus* that have great garden merit as they grow and develop into maturity here at Caerhays. I mention only the best performances so far. There are several other candidates in the race (*S. japonicus* 'Jippei' - Kawamure) and, some, which I think have already been superseded (*S. japonicus* 'Fargesii' and 'Farges's Belle').

17. *Styrax japonicus* 'Sohuksan' ('Emerald Pagoda')

This was originally collected and named after the South Korean island where it was first collected in 1985. It has larger and darker leaves and the flowers are considerably larger than any of our other *S. japonicus*. Nicely scented when it is fully out; less so when it first opens. Once these small trees reach 15-20 feet after only 10 or so years the branches readily bend down with the sheer weight of the hundreds and thousands of flowers. A very superior clone and the autumn colour isn't bad either.





18. *Styrax japonicus* 'Evening Light'

This variety needs to be grown in full sun to ensure that the leaves remain dark in colour and do not fade to olive green in shade. The new growth is dark purple and this works well when set against the white or pale pink flowers.



19. *Styrax japonicus* 'Purple Dress'

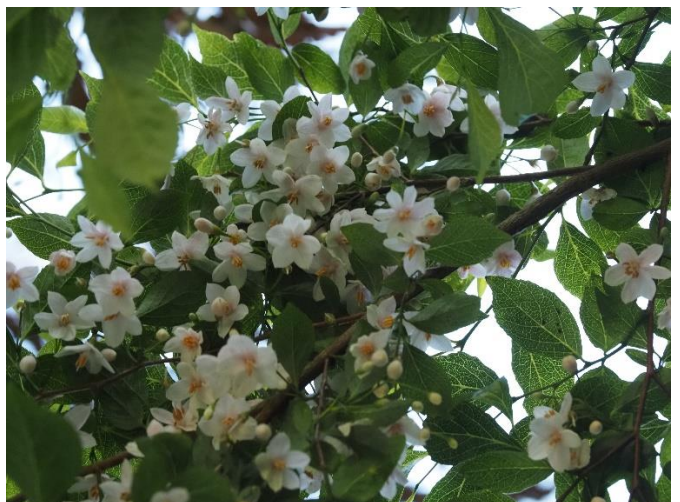
This is a purple leaved selection with pink flowers and the colour contrast between leaf and flower is even more pronounced. This is developing here into a bushy large shrub which gets more impressive each year.

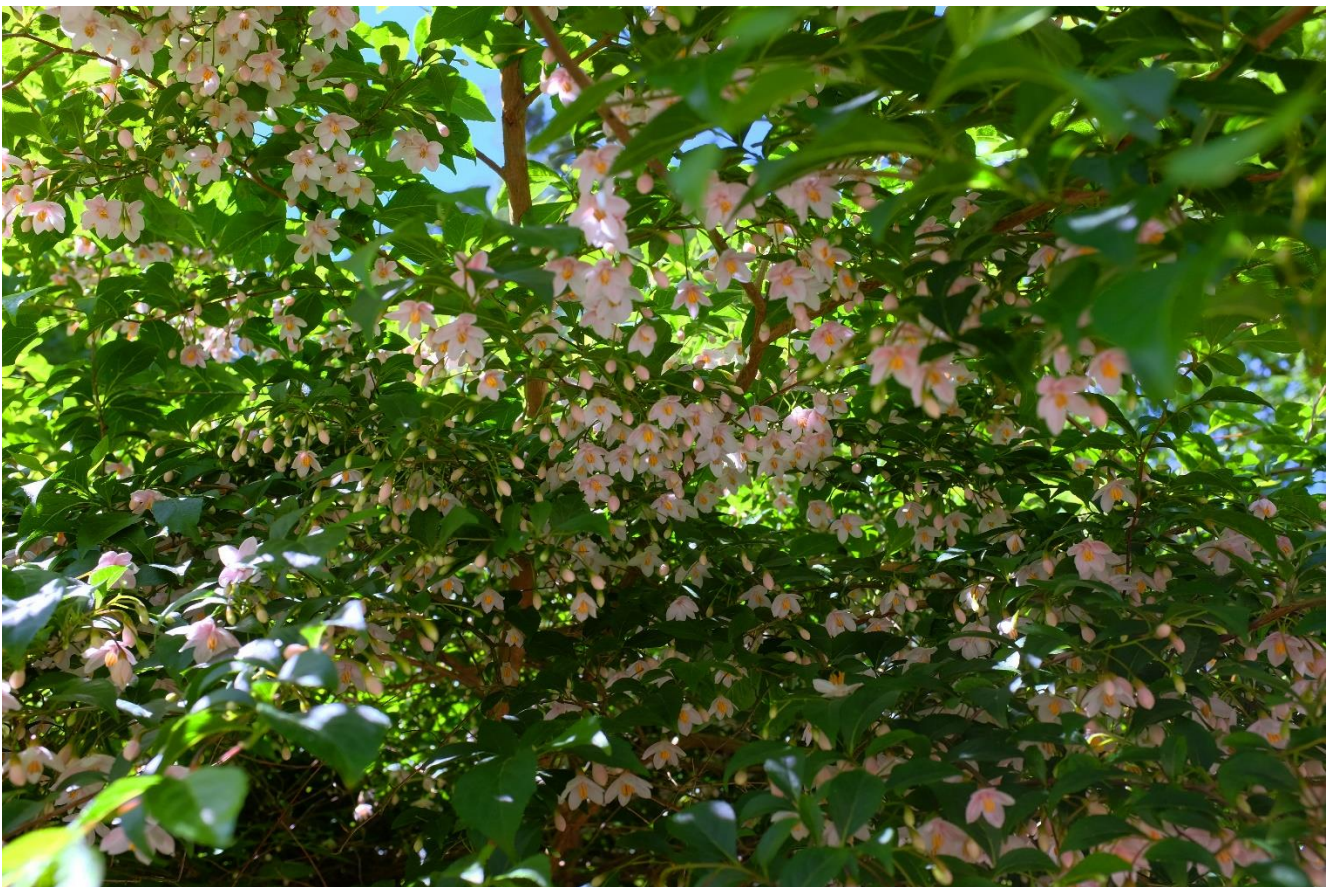




20. *Styrax japonicus* 'Pink Chimes'

The oldest plant here grows on a bank and, when it is in its pomp, it can have many tens of thousands of pink flowers. You do, however, have to stop and look up into the tree as the flowers are not at all evident from a distance. The buds are pink but only a hint of pink remains within the centres of the flowers when they are full out.





21. *Styrax japonicus* 'Pendulus'

As you can see in the picture the 30 year old tree with cascading branches has created the perfect den beneath it for a small child to hide in. As you would expect the tree is extremely floriferous but you need to join the child and fight your way inside the branches to see just how floriferous. The very late autumn colour, in December here, is superb.



22. *Styrax japonicus* 'Snow Cone'

An upright growing tree which flowers early in the season at the same time as the leaves appear in late May. The enormous terminal clusters of flowers have petals which remain closed around the flower. From a distance the plant name is entirely justified.



23. *Styrax japonicus* 'Fragrant Fountain'

The largest flowers and the best scent of any of the new several named clones with a weeping habit. 'Crystal' is another with a weeping habit but the flowers are much smaller.



Let us finish what has become a far larger list than I would have thought possible just 8 years ago by having a quick look at the remarkable bark textures and colour on the best of the *Styrax* species.

- *Styrax odoratissimus*



- *Styrax hookeri*



- *Styrax formosanus* var. *formosanus*



- *Styrax formosanus* var *hayatainus*



- *Styrax obassia*



- *Styrax hemsleyanus*



- *Styrax wuyuanensis*



- *Styrax faberi*



- *Styrax serrulatus*



- *Styrax tonkinensis*



It should not be difficult to appreciate that the *Styrax* story is only starting to be told in UK gardens. There are many interesting new species and cultivators becoming widely available which are most easily grown from seed rather than cuttings.

After the last of the yellow magnolias and deciduous azaleas are over the *Styrax* come into their own in June. We may think of them as companion plants to *Stewartia* species and a range of different *Cornus* which also flower in June. Equally they work well alongside the late June and early July flowering magnolia species; *M. globosa*, *M. insignis*, *M. sapaensis*, *M. tamaulipana* and *M. virginiana* to mention but a few.

Within the next 30 years glades of *Styrax* will hopefully become a far more common feature of our woodland gardens and be perfectly capable of attracting visitors to them in their own right. The great Northern Irish gardens make a big play of *Eucryphia* time in August. Snowbells in June are equally capable of putting on a show that the public have never properly appreciated before from this hugely floriferous genus.

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