

In Defense of Forsythia

As spring arrives so too does this long overdue defense of forsythia, a shrub much maligned for its front-yard associations and “non-native” status. Forsythia may not have originated in North America, and it may not even be the only shrub to have yellow blooms on bare branches; nonetheless, it deserves appreciation for its cheerful signal that spring is coming and its ability to grow in the toughest patches of dirt. This is not an argument to plant forsythia at the exclusive expense of native shrubs like *Lindera* or *Hamamelis*. This is simply a call to recognize the role forsythia plays in the garden landscape, how well it works with other species, and how happy it is in spring.

When allowed to grow unsheared, just lightly pruned for air circulation, the forsythia becomes a lovely, overflowing vase of bright yellow, bursting into life while most landscapes remain relatively grey. It won't sucker and spread so it can be interplanted with other shrubs that might bloom at different times or in different colors. While not a “native”, forsythia is both food and shelter for many species. Bees and other pollinators forage in its blooms and the thicket of branches is a welcome haven for birds, insects, and small mammals.

To place forsythia in the category of ecologically harmful, increasingly out-of-fashion suburban plants, ignores the elegance and ecological chops of this cheerful workhorse. This is not a stinky Bradford pear, breaking beneath the first snow, nor is it weeping Kwanzan cherry gumdrop propped on a grafted lollipop stick. Not that these might not also deserve reprieve. But the forsythia is and can be so much more. Take Beatrix Farrand's Forsythia Dell at Dumbarton Oaks: a full acre of tumbling forsythia spotted with the occasional tree. This forsythia landscape is not dated and bereft of life. It remains vigorous and humming.

Yes, the lexicon of American garden plants needs to broaden and yes, the garden is and should be understood as part of a connected and moving system of organisms, nutrients, and water. But this need not (and should not) preclude the continued cultivation and enjoyment of the glorious vernal showman, forsythia.



In Defense of Forsythia: (Top) Beatrix Farrand's Forsythia Dell at Dumbarton Oaks, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library. (Bottom) Forsythia at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, 2022.