

Chaenomeles – Youthful Plants!

For gardeners, there is always one plant that triggers fond childhood memories and pulls us back to our youth. *Chaenomeles*, alias Flowering Quince, is one such plant from my childhood. During my high school years, I worked on an old estate and the owner had an ancient clump of *Chaenomeles* that always mystified me. Its thorny stems typically kept me at bay, but during spring, the orange display of flowers lit up the garden and my horticultural curiosity!

Chaenomeles is a member of the Rosaceae or Rose Family and is a cousin to apples and pears. It consists of merely three species, all of which are native to Asia. The plant was first documented by Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828) during his visit to Japan in 1776. He mistakenly thought it to be a Pear and in 1784 named the plant *Pyrus japonica*. In 1796, Sir Joseph Banks, the Director of Kew, the Royal Botanic Gardens in England, introduced this plant to Europe. Based upon the greater quantity of seeds, Christiaan Hendrik Persoon (1761-1836) renamed the plant as a new species of *Cydonia* or Quince, naming it *Cydonia japonica*. It was the English botanist John Lindley (1799-1865) who finally determined it to be a unique and new genus, penning the name *Chaenomeles* in 1822. The name stems from the Greek *Chainen*, meaning to split and *Mēlon*, referring to an apple or fruit. Evidently Lindley had seen or was told that the fruit splits when ripe – a highly infrequent occurrence! Interestingly, this is not the end of the story. As is true of many plants found in Japan, the plant that Banks brought to Kew was not the true *Chaenomeles japonica*. The plant was actually *Chaenomeles speciosa*, a native to China that had been brought to Japan centuries before as an ornamental. The true *Chaenomeles japonica* grows to a mere 4' tall while *C. speciosa* stretches to 8-12'! The third species is *Chaenomeles cathayensis*. Unlike the previous two species, which sport 2-3" diameter orange or red flowers, this species has white flowers blushed with pink and also reaches heights of 12' or greater. The species epithet was penned by the Austrian botanist Camillo Karl Schneider (1876-1951), honoring its homeland. Cathay is the anglicized version of Catai, which during the mid-evil period referenced Northern China. The stems of all three species are armed with thorns and require attentive caution while pruning!

Unlike true Quinces, *Chaenomeles* is cultivated for the abundance and extended appearance of the flowers, not the fruit. Hence, the common name of Flowering Quince. Interestingly, although most of the selections used in the



Garden are from China, *Chaenomeles* was often known as Japonica during the 19th and early portions of the 20th centuries! Depending upon the weather vagaries of a given year, the plants



typically begin to bloom in early April and remain very colorful through early May! Cultivars of *Chaenomeles japonica* and *C. speciosa*, along with the cross between the two, named *C. x superba* (as pictured above and on the left), display attractive single or double flowers that are red, pink, orange or a blushed white. Although *Chaenomeles speciosa* is typically quite tall, the selection 'Iwai Nishiki' is

an exception, only reaching 2' tall and a rather portly 10' around. It is covered with double red flowers and makes a stunning groundcover! One of the hottest new forms is the Double Take™ Series from Dr. Thomas Ranney at N.C. State University. The plants present very showy double red, pink or orange flowers on compact growing plants with thornless stems!

Although best recognized for flowering, *Chaenomeles* fruit is also edible! They are highly acidic and unpalatable when raw, but with adequate sugar they make an ideal jam or jelly! They also contain more vitamin C than Lemons and when fully ripened come autumn, they are often wonderfully aromatic. *Chaenomeles* are relatively carefree, flowering and fruiting best when grown in full sun in soils of average moisture and fertility. Once the plants mature, removal of the older canes promotes the regeneration of new, perpetuating the plants life and the chance for instilling memories in yet another youthful gardener!