

Features

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Here Comes the Sun

Katie Elzer-Peters



Some plants just have “it,” the star power that stops people in their tracks to ask “WHAT is THAT?” Dramatic color. Utility in almost any application—from hedging to containers to use as a specimen in the landscape. A well-behaved growth habit. Sunshine Ligustrum (*Ligustrum sinense*), selected by North Carolina-based breeder Pat McCracken, is one of those plants. Really? A ligustrum? Yes.

Sunshine's story is one of a “little plant that could,” except plants can't “think I can,” so it was the breeder Pat who kept it moving from a single yellow sport on a variegated privet he bought in a nursery to a best-selling plant in Plant Development Services' Southern Living Collection. It was an uphill battle from day one.

Pat chopped the yellow branch from the bigger privet plant into cuttings about 15 years ago. “I watched the plants grow for 10 years. One day I realized that none of them had bloomed. Then I got really excited,” Pat says. Species Chinese privet plants are amazingly tough and can handle almost any growing condition, but they're frighteningly invasive due to prolific flowering followed by high seed set, aggressive suckering and almost iron constitutions. Plants will out-compete native species, sometimes pushing them to the brink of extinction. Pat's plants exhibited the same toughness as the species, but with eye-popping color and no flowers.

“I had to decide ‘Do we really need another privet?’ Ultimately, I sent it out for trialing in the Southeast and West Coast. Eventually the market will dictate whether something is a good plant.” Pat says.

Sunshine had a bumpy ride when it first hit the market, never reaching its stride. You can have a great plant or a great idea, but getting the product into the hands of the right people is key to success. Pat didn't give up. At a Charleston wedding of a friend in the green industry, Pat was seated next to Peter Van Risen of Concept Plants. “He asked me if I had anything interesting and I mentioned Sunshine. I told him I'd give him that plant to work with, saying, ‘We'll see what you do with it.’ Now I'm sending him everything we've got,” Pat says.

Peter, based in Europe, works with Plant Development Services, Inc. in the United States. PDSI re-licensed Sunshine and released it through the Southern Living Plant Collection. It's in its second year with the collection and demand is already outpacing supply for the plant. Kip McConnell, Director of PDSI says, “You

almost couldn't ask for a plant that's more perfect. Retailers love it because it brightens the whole shrub yard. Its 'wow factor' foliage really draws people in."

It's also a hit with growers. Kip says, "They can finish a 1-gal. plant in six to eight weeks instead of 12 to 16 weeks." Landscapers love the foliage color, ease of care, wide adaptability to varying soil conditions and versatility of use. "It looks great in containers. You can prune it as a low hedge or train it into a topiary," says Kip. They still see some resistance from state governing boards concerned that it's a ligustrum. "We have examples of the plant growing in place for years and years with no flowering and a compact, non-invasive growth habit. We just keep working with individuals and organizations to help them understand the plant."

For Sunshine Ligustrum, the climb to the top of the shrub market was meandering and sometimes frustrating, but for consumers, success with the plant is instant. Pat thought he had a hit on his hands. He was right. **GP**

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