



The plant daphne belongs to the genus *Daphne* of the *Thymelaeaceae* family. The genus name most probably comes from the nymph of the same name from Greek mythology, but some sources think it could come from an Indo-European word, meaning odor. There are around 70 species of both evergreen and deciduous, found from Europe and North Africa to temperate and subtropical Asia. While daphnes are well known for their highly scented flowers, there are a number of species that are not fragrant.

Daphnes are compact plants; they are more like shrubs, very much at home in rock gardens, as well as in mixed borders alongside plants such as camellias and rhododendrons. What the flowers lack in size, they make up for in quantity, as they come in showy clusters/terminal heads of blossoms. Different species vary in habit – some are erect, while others are rounded and/or spreading – most are evergreen. The leaves are undivided, mostly arranged alternately. The tiny flowers lack petal; they have four sepals tubular at the base with free lobes at the apex and are grouped, either in clusters in the leaf axil towards the end of the stems or in terminal heads, which open from mid-winter to late spring, in delicate shades of white, cream, or pink to bright pink and purple.

One of the best things about our winter garden is the fragrance of daphnes in bloom. *Daphne odora* or winter daphne is probably what most of us grow. An evergreen shrub from China, *Daphne odora* (about 1m height) opens its exquisite posies of waxy pale pink flowers from rosy buds all along its evergreen stems in July-August (winter). Its fragrance is one of the most intense of all flowering plants, filling the air for meters around, redolent of expensive Parisian soap or perfume, or if you'd rather think in culinary term, a rich, sweet citrus dessert. As well as the classic green-leaved variety with pink and white flowers, there is also one with a creamy yellow border to the leaf (*aureo-marginata*), and a pure white flowering form (*alba*) whose fragrance is even more intoxicating. It is no wonder that in Asian literature, the plant is poetically called “a thousand-mile scent” – no doubt referring to the intense fragrance of the blossoms.

Daphnes have a reputation for being very touchy plants. They are often slow to establish and are best left undisturbed once planted. They need friable, humus-rich, moist soil with good drainage in a part-shaded, woodland position facing east, with protection from hot afternoon sun. They can tolerate a little frost but in very cold areas, they are better off in a sheltered position. A thick mulch over the roots, but kept well away from the stem, will ensure a cool root run, as often the plants suffer from root rot (they could easily have been over-watered) and then the roots rot causing the leaves to look bedraggled. Good drainage is very important, so planting in a raised bed is highly recommended; the plant likes damp (not wet) soil and tolerates short periods of drought much better than wet feet. Various fungicidal preparations are now available which can be poured over the root area if the plant seems to be ailing, it may help to revive if it is not too far-gone. Sometimes aphids and scale attack the leaves, white oil spray would help.

One important thing to remember is that don't ever try to transplant an established daphne, as they detest root disturbance. With their angular, open habit, they are not the tidiest shrubs in the world; they are probably best sited where they can merge into surrounding greenery once their 'showing-off time' is over. The shrubs rarely get taller than 1m and the largest cultivar barely tops 1.5m, in general they do not need to be pruned unless they are growing into another plant. Picking short sprays of flowers for indoor display helps keep the plant looking tidier and that is all pruning it needs.



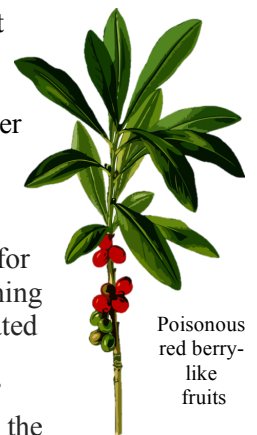
Golden leaf border

Daphnes make excellent cut flowers; in late winter when most other flowers are still asleep, daphne blossoms with their intense fragrance is a most welcome sight heralding the soon-arrival of Spring.

A variegated green-leaves-with-yellow-leaf-margins form, *Daphne 'odorata aureo-marginata'*, noted for having slightly better winter hardiness and less vulnerable to root rot, is currently available at many nurseries. The plain-leaved version, when not in flower, is a rather ordinary looking shrub; variegation gives the plant a small and discreet role to play for the rest of the year. *Daphne 'Eternal Fragrance'* is an award-winning variety that apparently overcame all the traditional hurdles associated with daphne growing. In late winter/early spring, it produces tight

clusters of classic white flowers at the tips of its deep green foliage, and its 'showing-off time' doesn't end there; it continues to spot flower repeatedly throughout the year. To top things up, the plant is frost hardy as well as both heat and dry tolerant; and also, not pH sensitive as the classic varieties.

All parts of daphne plant are poisonous to humans and a range of domestic animals and some people experience dermatitis from contact with the sap. Propagation is from cuttings or layers. Fresh seed germinates readily, but the red berry-like fruit is highly poisonous, and the plant very rarely produces berries after flowering.



Poisonous red berry-like fruits