

Tails of Glory

Native silktassel more appreciated overseas

The British have always had an eye for a good plant, and anything that looks alluring in a gloomy northern winter should be downright irresistible. So it's not surprising Brits embraced the Oregon native, coast silktassel bush (*Garrya elliptica*). Scottish explorer and plant hunter David Douglas introduced the plant to cultivation in 1828, along with salal and red-flowering currant, from seed he collected in the Pacific Northwest. Since it is the only member of the genus that is commonly encountered it is usually called silktassel or just garrya.

In London, where I spent this winter, silktassel is almost ubiquitous, yet I rarely see it in Oregon gardens. At the coast, where it grows naturally, it is happy as a clam. Given a little shade from the hottest sun and shelter from wind, it also does fine in the Willamette Valley. Why don't we plant it more often? One reason may be that it can grow a little thin and gangly, and gardeners seem conditioned to expect evergreens to be dense and rounded. Unfortunately, many of the plants that fill that bill grow too big, too fast. Some, such as cherry laurel and Portugal laurel, are also highly invasive. In the right situation, silktassel may be a good alternative.

What's so great about silktassel is its catkins. Most of the year it is just an unexceptional evergreen, whose dark

green, leathery leaves with wavy margins and pale felted undersides are not quite distinctive enough to get your attention. But from December through February, when it shakes out those beguiling, gray-green tassels, a good specimen will stop you in your tracks. Female plants that have a male companion produce fruit that attract birds, but male plants are most often planted because they have longer, showier catkins. The American cultivar 'James Roof' has catkins a foot long.

Garrya grows at a moderate rate to 8-12 feet, in sun or shade. The leaves may burn in hot locations (don't plant it against an unshaded south-facing wall) while in heavy shade the bush will be quite scrawny. You can minimize this effect by planting several young plants in a group two feet apart, shortening young growth occasionally to help maintain density. I've seen this done effectively in London parks. Alternatively, you can train your silktassel on a cool wall or fence. It's young limbs are flexible, and an espalier is a wonderful way to show off the catkins. In a sunny place you can also train it as a small tree for maximum display.

A word of warning: Silktassel does not



Native silktassel

recover well after transplanting, nor does it like to be cut way back (as in renewal pruning). So you want to get it in the right place early on and prune it, where necessary, lightly and often. Like many Oregon natives, silktassel is tolerant of drought. It also puts up with pollution, and does not appear to be fussy about soil type. It does, however, need good drainage, especially where it grows in heavy soil. Plant it slightly above grade, and be sparing with summer water. If it grows quickly but is slow to flower, the soil may be too fertile.

CW

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