Berberis thunbergii Japanese Barberry[1]

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Introduction

Japanese barberry is thorny, so it's useful for barrier plantings. The plant tolerates most light exposures and soils, but purple-leaved cultivars turn green in shade. This shrub grows slowly but transplants easily. It grows three to six feet tall and spreads four to seven feet. Japanese barberry can be sheared and used as a hedge plant. The main ornamental features are persistent red fruits and fall color in shades of red, orange and yellow. Some strains fruit more heavily than others. The plant produces yellow flowers, but these are not highly ornamental.

Figure 1. Full Form—*Berberis thunbergii*: Japanese Barberry
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

Figure 2. Full Form, Fall Color—*Berberis thunbergii*: Japanese Barberry
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

Figure 3. Leaf, Fall Color—*Berberis thunbergii*: Japanese Barberry
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

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Figure 4. Fruit—*Berberis thunbergii*: Japanese Barberry
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Berberis thunbergii*

Pronunciation: BUR-bur-iss thun-BUR-jee-eye

Common name(s): Japanese barberry, crimson pygmy

Family: *Berberidaceae*

Plant type: ground cover; shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 4 through 9 (Figure 5)

Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
Credits: undefined

Planting month for zone 7: year round

Planting month for zone 8: year round

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Origin: native to temperate Asia

Invasive potential: invasive and not recommended by UF/IFAS faculty (reassess in 10 years)

Uses: border; mass planting; ground cover; hedge; edging; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size)

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 2 to 8 feet

Spread: 4 to 6 feet

Plant habit: round

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: terminal spine

Leaf shape: obovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches

Leaf color: purple or red

Fall color: yellow; orange

Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: less than .5 inch

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: persists on the plant; attracts birds

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not particularly showy; typically multi-trunked or clumping stems

Current year stem/twig color: reddish

Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun; plant grows in the shade

Soil tolerances: sand; clay; acidic; loam; alkaline

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerances: poor

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: plant has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

Several cultivars are listed: 'Atropurpurea'—reddish foliage; 'Atropurpurea Erecta'—purple leaves, erect habit; 'Atropurpurea Redbird'—better foliage color, leaves larger, more compact habit; 'Aurea'—bright yellow leaves; 'Crimson Pygmy'—a dwarf two feet high and three feet across, with reddish foliage; 'Globe'—globe-shaped, broad; 'Minor'—smaller leaves, fruit and flowers, rounded habit; 'Rose Glow'—new growth pink with red spots; 'Thornless'—no thorns; 'Variegata'—leaves with spots of white, light gray, and yellow.

Pests and Diseases

Aphids suck plant juices, and heavy infestations coat the leaves with sticky honeydew. Large aphid populations cause the new growth to be distorted. Aphids can be dislodged by a high -pressure water spray from the garden hose.

Scale insects blend in well with the stems and may not be readily noticed. Infestations can be controlled with horticultural oil. The preferred method of control involves regular inspection for early detection of the infestation then spraying with oil.

Bacterial leaf spots are first small and dark green and appear water soaked. Later the spots turn purplish-brown. Leaf stalks and new growth may also be attacked. Infection of older twigs results in dieback. Prune out and destroy infected twigs. There are fungicides which may take care of the problem.

Anthracnose is sometimes listed as a leaf spot. Symptoms are round, brown spots with reddish margins on the upper leaf surface. Another fungus causes purple spots on the leaves. There are fungicides which may provide some control of these diseases.

Powdery mildews of different genera cause a white coating on the leaves. Plant in full sun in an area with good air circulation to help prevent mildew.

Verticillium wilt causes wilting and eventual death. Nothing can be done but to keep plants healthy by watering and fertilizing. Severely infected plants do not recover.