

ABELIA

BOTANICAL NAME: *Abelia*

FAMILY: Caprifoliaceae

Abelia and Abeliophyllum are often the first plants listed when grouped alphabetically and the latter are first to bloom in the spring. The Abeliophyllum or white forsythia with its sweet fragrance blooms before its leaves appear in the early spring. Interestingly, the Abeliophyllum is a member of the olive family and not the Caprifoliaceae family. Abelias with white, pink or red blossoms and glossy green leaves are found in most gardens and bloom from summer through fall.



Both are named for Dr. Clarke Abel who went on a plant expedition to China in 1817 with Lord Amherst. The trip was a disaster in respect to nature, politics and stupidity. In 1817 plant collectors could not get onto mainland China rather were allowed to explore the Portuguese island of Macao and gather whatever the Chinese allowed them to take. The British pushed the Chinese to have access to the plants in the interior of China; however, the Chinese resented the British involvement in the opium trade. Lord Amherst was sent to China to arrange an agreement with the emperor. Abel related that Amherst was “urged to enter the imperial presence and to prostrate” (at 6:00 a.m.), but he “declared his intention not to perform the ceremony” so the embassy was dismissed. The British explained that they refused to “Kowtow” to what Abel called “every piece of yellow rag that they might choose to consider as emblematical of his Chinese majesty.” As a result the interior of China was closed to plant collectors until the gunboat diplomacy dictated the 1842 Treaty of Nanking.

Dr. Abel collected what he could on his return to England, but his ship the *Alceste*, was wrecked, his box of seeds and plants had been thrown off the ship so that an embassy gentleman’s linen could be shipped. Whatever was left was captured and burned by Malaysian pirates. Luckily, the *Abelia chinensis* had been left in Canton with a few other plants that reached England a little later.

The pinks, whites, and reds of the Abelia and Abeliophyllum are the only known colors. No yellow flowers exist in either family. This may be lucky for the memory of a man who would not bow to that color. Happily, A for Abelia is possible even though the journey was full of trials and errors.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names
by Diana Wells