

# Wisteria

Botanical Name: *Wisteria*: Family: Fabaceae

The wisteria we grow in our gardens is either from China (*Wisteria sinensis*) or Japan (*Wisteria floribunda*), but there is a Native American wisteria, which was sent by Mark Catesby to England in 1724. Catesby called the plant a “Carolina Kidney Bean.” It was given the botanical name of *Glycine frutescens*: the glycine family is in the soybean family and was grown in England, but not widely. Wisteria was named for Doctor Caspar Wistar who was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He was president of the Philosophical Society and a well-known botanist.



Wistar was a friend of President Jefferson who had received the remains of a giant sloth in 1795. Jefferson thought the skeletal remains were a giant lion. Jefferson called the remains a “megalonyx.” Americans were accused of not having any large animals because the sun cannot be felt and so everything shrunk. This proved to be very wrong when a giant sloth skeleton was found in Paraguay and given the name megathere. Jefferson, Wistar and many Americans continued to believe that the United States had equally large animals to European ones.

In 1818 John Reeves, a tea inspector for the East India Tea Company, sent a Chinese Wisteria to London. Reeves tried to get the plant named *Consequa* because he had obtained it from a Cantonese merchant of that name, who died in poverty, and was not recognized by the West. The merchant was a successful swindler of English merchants in Canton, but his name didn't get attached to Wisteria.

When the Chinese wisteria was thought to be very tender, it was planted in a hot greenhouse, but it almost died. In 1838, a plant growing outdoors in London had reached eleven feet in height and ninety by seventy feet in either direction; it has been growing outside happily every since.

Still each variety of wisteria is a welcome plant each spring whether in England, the East or America.

*100 Flowers and how They Got Their Names,*  
by Diana Wells