

Trumpeting the Trumpet ~ Native Honeysuckle

By Kim Smith

This past weekend I set up shop at the annual [Mass Audubon Birders Meeting](#). I was there to listen to the daylong programs and to sell *Oh Garden!* and other nature- and bird-related books offered by my publisher David Godine. I can hardly give a good reporting of any of the programs presented as I felt it irresponsible to leave my table unattended and was only able to poke my head into the lecture hall sporadically. Fortunately, for me, my table was placed next to Peter Alden's and Jennifer Forman-Orth's shared table. Jennifer is a biologist who works for the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture and travels around the state to educate people about how to recognize the dreaded [Asian Longhorned Beetle \(*Anoplophora glabripennis*\)](#) and its devastating effects. [Peter Alden](#) is the author of fifteen books on North American and African wildlife, including the *Audubon Field Guide to New England* (with Brian Cassie), *Field Guide to Invasive Plants of New England*, and *Audubon Field Guide to Florida*, which he co-wrote with Rick Cech (Cech is the author of *Butterflies of the East Coast*, which regular readers know is a book I highly recommend). We own a well-worn copy of Alden's *Field Guide to New England*—a book that belongs in the home of every New England family.

I made the acquaintance of Katrina Kruse who was at the meeting representing Houghton Mifflin. We were talking about garden design and difficult areas in the landscape when she asked for a suggestion of what to plant over a tumbled-down stonewall that is located in part shade and receives some sun. Hummingbirds were on my mind, as later that afternoon I was planning to clean and to set out the hummingbird feeders, and immediately thought of our native honeysuckle. My very favorite variety, and a favorite of the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, is *Lonicera sempervirens* x *brownii* 'Dropmore Scarlet.' 'Dropmore Scarlet' is not accurately described by its name. The petals are not at all scarlet colored, but a singing shade of carmine on the exterior and golden yellow-orange on the inside. Carmine is that gorgeous color halfway between rose red and vermilion. Situated throughout our garden are several mature plants of 'Dropmore Scarlet' and during the growing season our mama hummingbird makes her daily rounds, morning, midday and at dusk, nectaring from the blossoms of honeysuckle, bougainvillea, and annual cardinal climber. I am so enamored of *Lonicera sempervirens* that we tucked in several other cultivars. It is not fair to compare the hummingbird-attracting potency of these newly planted varieties to our more mature 'Dropmore Scarlet' just yet as they are only a foot high. I can, however, attest to the late-blooming trait and the hummingbird attractiveness of 'Major Wheeler.' There is a specimen growing around back of the nursery at the New England Wild Flower Society that is several stories tall. In the brief moment that I was there purchasing several honeysuckles for a design client, I noticed their stunning 'Major Wheeler' was still flowering, and *three* hummingbirds were spotted

Lonicera sempervirens, also called coral and trumpet honeysuckle, is a twining or trailing woody vine that is deciduous in New England, hardy in zones four through ten, and is very drought tolerant. Trumpet honeysuckle is not at all fussy about soil. Plant in full sun to part shade. If trumpet honeysuckle becomes large and ungainly, prune hard to the ground—it grows very quickly and a vigorous pruning will only encourage more flowers.

'Major Wheeler' purportedly flowers the earliest of the trumpet honeysuckles, and in a deeper red hue than that of the carmine of 'Dropmore Scarlet.' 'John Clayton' is a cheery, cadmium yellow, a naturally occurring variant of *Lonicera sempervirens*, and was originally

discovered growing wild in Virginia. The blossoms of 'Mandarin' are a lovely shade of Spanish orange. I am not prepared to recommend 'Mandarin' as the foliage looked ratty all summer. Foliage often looks poor initially after transplanting, so we will give it one more year in the garden.

Early blooms are an important feature for a vine planted to lure hummingbirds. You want to provide red to orange tubular-shaped flowers and have your hummingbird feeders hung and ready for the first of the northward-migrating scouts. If nothing is available, they will pass by your garden and none will take residence. Hummingbirds can easily distinguish red contrasting against green. We go so far as to plant vivid Red Riding Hood tulips beneath the hummingbird feeders, which hang from the bows of the flowering fruit trees. Although hummingbirds do not nectar from tulips, the color red draws them into the garden and the flowering fruit trees and sugar water provide sustenance for travel-weary migrants.

Lonicera sempervirens has myriad uses in the landscape. Cultivate to create vertical layers, in a small garden especially. Plant trumpet honeysuckle to cover an arbor, alongside a porch pillar or to weave through trelliage. Allow it clamber over an eyesore or down an embankment. Plant at least one near the primary paths of the garden so that you can enjoy the hummingbirds that will be drawn to its nectar-rich blossoms. I practically bumped into one last season as she was making her rounds. Did you know they make a funny squeaky sound? I began to take notice of their presence in our garden, when at my office desk one afternoon in late summer, with windows open wide, I heard very faint, mouse-like squeaks. I glanced up from my work, fully expecting to see a mouse, and was instead delighted to discover a female Ruby-throat outside my office window, nectaring at the Cardinal Climber. Trumpet honeysuckle not only provides nectar for the hummingbirds, it also offers succulent berries and shelter for a host of birds.

Please join me on Wednesday evening, April 15th, from 6:30 to 8 p.m., at the Manchester-by-the-sea Public Library for an informal talk and book signing for *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!*

End Note: The above mentioned cultivars of *Lonicera sempervirens* are available from the nursery at Garden in the Woods, which is the home of NEWFS, Corliss Brothers, Wolf Hill, and Weston Nurseries. Please check availability.



Lonicera 'Dropmore Scarlet'



Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird at Sunset