

# Gold dust plant - *Aucuba*

## Shrub Profile

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At the holiday season, many people are looking for ways to add color to the dinner table or hearth by using outdoor plant material. The most common candidates for household decorating include many of the hollies (*Ilex*) with their brilliant red fruits or needle evergreens for boughs. An often-overlooked plant is the tropical-looking Japanese aucuba (*Aucuba japonica*).

Considering the many favorable attributes of Japanese aucuba, it's surprising that this plant is not used more often in Arkansas. These are beautiful plants. This broadleaf evergreen shrub has extremely clean, glossy green leaves. Leaf arrangement is opposite (like a viburnum or dogwood), and in most cases the leaf edge (margin) has distinctive large teeth ("dentate" serrations). Some leaves may have no teeth along the margin (called "entire"). The glossy, almost polished leaves give this plant its tropical appearance. Except for the older, interior stems, shoots are also a lawn green. The thick, rounded shoots have a distinctive fetid odor when broken.

Saying this shrub has green leaves may be slightly misleading, since 99% of plants sold in the trade are variegated cultivars. The general theme of most of these variegated selections is some degree of yellow (gold) flecking. In one article that listed 33 cultivars of Japanese aucuba, at least half had some type of yellow/gold variegation in the leaf. Cultivar names such as 'Gold Dust,' 'Gold Splash,' 'Gold Spot,' and 'Golden Heart' might give you some kind of mental picture.

You will be hard pressed to notice the flowers on aucuba. Like hollies and the ginkgo tree, this plant is dioecious (i.e. a plant is either male or female). The individual flowers are very small, a soft purple in color, and appear in March/April. Male flowers are born in an upright panicle above the foliage, but the female flowers, which develop in the axil of leaves, are more hidden from view.

Make the effort to purchase a female selection. In the winter (October through March) you will be rewarded with some of the most beautiful, ½" long red fruits imaginable. It is those beautiful red fruits

nestled in a bed of glossy foliage that makes this a holiday treat. For some reason, birds do not prefer these fruits, so they persist for months.

The habit is typically a dense, rounded shrub with a height of 5' to 7' and equal spread. The dense rounded habit is achieved with no pruning. This is an excellent plant if you are trying to achieve a tropical or exotic look in your garden.

Because of our intense sun in Arkansas we must grow this plant in at least partial shade. The beauty of this plant is that it maintains its dense habit and beautiful glossy leaves even in the shade. When grown in full sun, the leaves will start out bleached and then turn black. This is a wonderful plant as a specimen inside a shaded courtyard or entryway. A well-drained soil with lots of organic matter would be ideal.

Most literature lists this plant as cold hardy in zones 7 (Little Rock) and 8 (Hope), but I have observed some nice specimens in the Fayetteville area (zone 6) in protected areas close to a home or building. Aucuba can be used as a specimen or grouped together. There should be no significant insect or disease issues in Arkansas, although a stem dieback caused by a fungus is reported in other states.



Common Name: gold dust, Japanese aucuba  
Varieties to look for: 'Variegata,' 'Gold Dust,' 'Gold Spot'  
Flower Color: light purple, but not showy  
Blooming period: mid-spring  
Perennial or annual: broadleaf evergreen shrub  
Size: 7' tall by 7' wide  
Exposure: partial sun to shade  
Soil: good drainage and organic matter  
Watering: moist best  
When to prune: not necessary  
Suggested use: specimen, grouped

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