

**Japanese ternstroemia –**  
***Ternstroemia gymnanthera***  
**Shrub Profile**  
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Diversity in our landscapes is a good thing. If everyone had the same plants in their yards, things would get pretty boring. Using more of our plant palette also reduces the chance for mass collapse from a serious disease or insect problem. The University of Arkansas Plant Evaluation Program is making a concerted effort to find hedge/screen alternatives to the overused and problem-plagued redbtip photinia (*Photinia x fraseri*) and Leyland cypress (*X Cupressocyparis leylandii*).

For those who live in central and southern Arkansas, there is another hedge/screen alternative. Japanese ternstroemia (pronounced turn-stro-mia; *Ternstroemia gymnanthera*), which is an upright-oval to oval-rounded shrub, is a viable broadleaf evergreen option for most of the state.

It may be a bit misleading to say that Japanese ternstroemia is a cookie-cutter substitute for Leyland cypress and redbtip photinia; it does not grow as quickly nor does it have as narrow-upright a habit as those two plants. Most of the mature ternstroemia tend to be about as tall as they are wide. A mature height of 10', with the same width, is pretty typical. Ternstroemia responds well to shearing, so the plant can be kept at a smaller size.

The broadleaf evergreen foliage is very clean. The alternately arranged leaves are leathery and somewhat spoon shaped (narrow-oblong to ovate-oblong). During the growing season, leaves are a dark green. In early May, the new emerging foliage is often a noticeable shade of maroon. While the color is subtle, it is very attractive against the backdrop of glossy, clean, interior leaves. In late winter, the green foliage will change to a dull reddish-bronze. In some ways the change in foliage color is like many of the Japanese Pieris (*Pieris japonica*) cultivars.

You would not plant ternstroemia for its flowers, although up close they are rather interesting. The flowers, which are born singly or in small clusters, are born at the end of thick stalks that originate from the axil of leaves. The stalk will be about 1" long. The flower bud is large and rounded, yet when the actual petals reflex (open), you hardly notice much of a difference from the rounded bud. Petals are typically cream white, but the petal edges may carry some red pigmentation similar to what we observe

in emerging leaves. While some flowers can open in late fall, most open in late May. The fruit is clearly an anomaly. Ripening in October, the ½”-diameter rounded berry is lipstick red. Due to their position on the plant and the small number of fruits, they rarely make an ornamental splash.

While the literature suggests the plant is best suited to shade or partial shade, it appears that ternstroemia does quite well in full sun. As we expect from many broadleaf evergreens, this plant would not be well suited to poorly drained soils. There is no serious disease or insect problem on this plant. Clearly, unlike redtip photinia, the foliage is not disfigured by any foliar diseases.

It is worth noting that this plant is more frequently referred to as Japanese cleyera in most garden centers. Using this name for ternstroemia is incorrect. Japanese cleyera (*Cleyera japonica*) is actually a completely different (and equally wonderful) broadleaf evergreen shrub. These two plants are very easy to separate by simply looking at the terminal bud. The bud on cleyera is a very sharp, pointed bud that is hooked. Buds on ternstroemia are small and rounded. We do not feel that cleyera is any more cold hardy than ternstroemia, so both are somewhat risky plants for the northwest region of Arkansas unless located in a very protected site.

Except for the northwest corner of Arkansas (zone 6), ternstroemia would be a nice broadleaf evergreen option for gardeners to consider.



Common Name: Japanese ternstroemia  
Varieties to look for: LeAnn™, Regal™, Bronze Beauty™  
Flower Color: cream-white  
Blooming period: May  
Perennial or annual: broadleaf evergreen  
Size: 10' tall by 10' wide  
Exposure: sun to partial shade  
Soil: avoid poorly drained sites  
Watering: moist best  
When to prune: late spring  
Suggested use: screen/hedge, foundation

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