

Cultivation Note

No. 38 BULLETIN OF THE RHODE ISLAND WILD PLANT SOCIETY Spring/Summer 2004

Wild Sarsaparilla *Aralia nudicaulis*

Family: ARALIACEAE

By Russ Bragg

Nowadays *Aralia nudicaulis* is a retiring companion on your woodland walk, a pretty flowering herb if you are looking for it or just another forgettable green thing if you're not. But with an armful of common names: Wild Sarsaparilla, Bamboo Brier, Rabbit Root, Shot Bush, False Sarsaparilla, Virginia Sarsaparilla, American Sarsaparilla, Small Spikenard, Wild Licorice -it must have been a big deal at one time!

Like many New World 'false' or 'wild' plants, the names come from its similarity to a once better known plant of some commercial importance, True Sarsaparilla or *Smilax officianalis*. Wild Sarsaparilla shares the characteristic of a pungent rootstock, and was at one time used by frugal country folk as a substitute flavoring for root beer. It has been used medicinally as treatment for pulmonary diseases, as an external tonic for skin ulcers and shingles, and as a compress for wounds. Additionally, the Crees used Rabbit Root as a treatment for syphilis.

The botanical name nudicaulis comes from a mixture of Latin and Greek: nudus, Latin for naked or bare, and kaulos, Greek for stem. Thus the name is descriptive of the naked stem of the plant.

Wild Sarsaparilla is distributed widely through North America, from Newfoundland west to British Columbia and Washington, south to Missouri and South Carolina. Sprawling open stands are common in the woods of New England.

As a landscape plant, Wild Sarsaparilla is easy to grow and requires little maintenance. Teamed with other natives such as Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum pubescens*), Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*), Yellow Star Grass (*Hypoxis hirsuta*), False Solomon's Seal (*Maianthemum racemosum*), and Canada Mayflower (*Maianthemum canadense*), one can create an informal, naturalizing woodland garden highly adapted to the rigors of New England. All are

Drawing of Wild Sarsaparilla, *Aralia nudicaulis* with fruit.

tolerant of a range of light from bright light to full shade, and soil ranging from good, well drained garden soil to lean, rocky 'New England Gold.' Further, once established, these plants will survive the periodic New England drought with good humor.

Description

A single, short, swollen stem gives rise to a long leaf stalk about 12-14" tall. The stalk branches at the top into three parts, each bearing 5 leaflets 2-4" long. A shorter (8-10") stalk also arises from the stem, and branches into three clusters of greenish white flowers in May to June. These flowers mature after a month into navy blue berries which closely resemble the fruits of lowbush blueberries ripening at about the same time. The stem is produced by a fleshy, wandering root which grows horizontally about 2" deep. The root of a mature plant will generate new stem buds several feet from the original plant, eventually forming loose, open colonies.

Cultivation

For someone starting a woodland garden, there are few easier plants to grow than Wild Sarsaparilla. While several of the reference sources mention the plant's predilection to moist, rich woodland soil, my own observations suggest that it is far less picky. In addition to good soil it thrives in that special New England crud consisting of sand, gravel and cobble topped with a veneer of forest duff – long on drainage and short on nutrients. Once established it is quite tolerant of drought. They are adaptable also in its requirements for light, preferring deep to light woodland shade but also taking as much as a half day of direct sun.

Propagation from seed

The seeds ripen in midsummer, when the berries turn a navy blue. The seeds require a period of moist-cold stratification prior to germination, so the simplest strategy is to sow cleaned, freshly collected seed in an outdoor seedbed and allow the New England winter to provide the cold. Don't despair if the germination rate is not high; seeds will continue to germinate after two winters.

Alas, the best protocol is beyond the means of most gardeners. According to a USDA bulletin, "Germination rates for wild sarsaparilla seeds taken from black bear scat (62-93 percent) were significantly...higher than for uneaten seeds (27-28 percent)."

Propagation from root cuttings

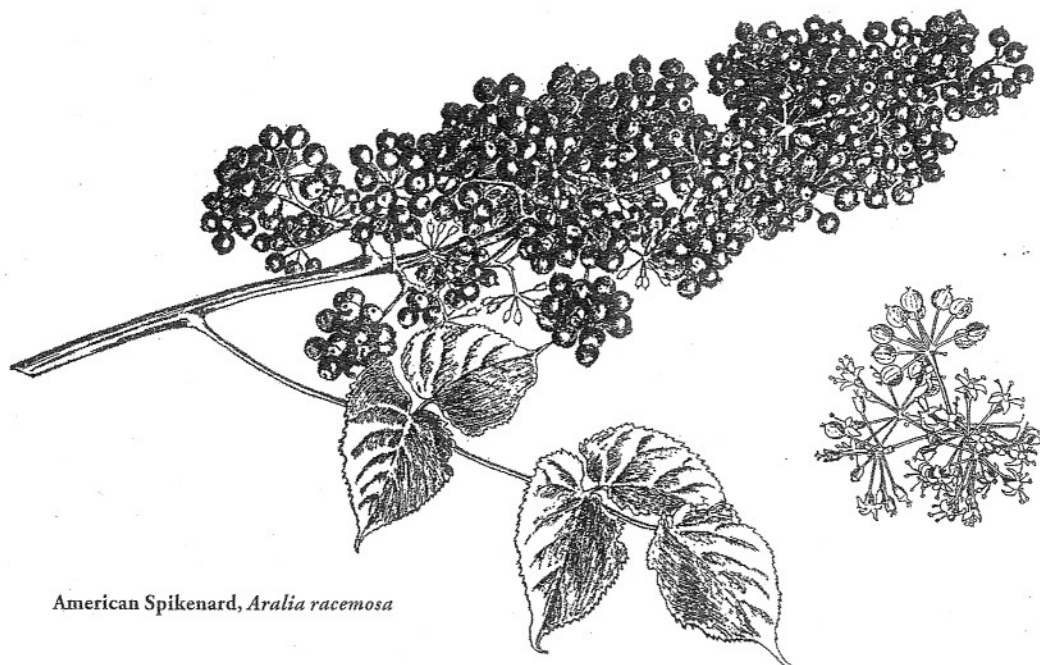
Take 4" cuttings in late fall (some texts say December, but don't wait until the ground has frozen!). Lay horizontally in a propagation bed, cover with 2" of soil and then mulch. Move plants to permanent location during the second spring. Alternatively, December cuttings can be laid horizontally in pots, covered with 2" of potting mix and stored in a cold frame for the winter. Report or transplant in the second spring.

Related Species Native to Rhode Island

<i>Aralia hispida</i>	Bristly Sarsaparilla, shrub, 3'.
<i>Aralia racemosa</i>	American Spikenard, perennial, 4-6'.

References:

1. Burrell, C. Colston. "Aralias: Tropical luxuriance with temperate ease." *Horticulture*, Sept/Oct 2002, p. 60.
2. Gould, Lisa L., et al. 1998. *Vascular Flora of Rhode Island: A List of Native and Naturalized Plants*. RI Natural History Survey.
3. Hinkley, Daniel J. 1999. *The Explorer's Garden: Rare and Unusual Perennials*. Timber Press.
4. Baskin, Carol J. and J.M. Baskin. 2001. *Propagation protocol for production of container Aralia nudicaulis plants*. University of Kentucky. www.nativeplantnetwork.org/network/view.asp?protocol_id=1466
5. Grieve, Mrs. M. *A Modern Herbal*. www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/b/bambri09.html
6. Plants for a Future: www.ibiblio.org/pfaf/cgi-bin/arr_html?Aralia+nudicaulis&CAN=LATIND
7. www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/forb/aranud/botanical_and_ecological_characteristics.html
8. www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/herbhunters/sarsaparilla.html
9. www.rook.org/earl/bwca/nature/herbs/aralianud.html
10. Illustration: USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. *Illustrated flora of the northern states and Canada*. Vol. 2: 618.



American Spikenard, *Aralia racemosa*