

Carolina Silverbell
Halesia tetraptera (carolina)

Family *Styracaceae*

By Deborah van Dam

The Silverbell is a true treasure of the spring woodland understory. It originated in Appalachia and has naturalized itself further north. In Rhode Island, it is classified as 3c/7 and as a Facultative Upland species [VFRI]. It is declining in its native range, probably due to habitat loss. It is rarely seen locally, which is a pity, because its beauty, lack of pests or diseases and easy care make it a very desirable plant. *Halesia* has the happy ability to bloom heavily in filtered light under high trees. It also works beautifully at the back of the border or as a specimen tree, especially when displayed against a dark background. This allows the Silverbell's remarkable profusion of row upon row of pearly white bells to show to best advantage. The opalescent flowers dangle fetchingly from every branch.

The Silverbell flowers as its leaves are just beginning to emerge, at about the same time as the red bud and the native dogwood. In this part of the country it grows to a small to medium-sized tree with a rounded crown. It can be multistemmed like a large shrub or pruned to a single trunk. The trunk is nicely patterned with gray-brown and silver. The branches are slim, and the 1/2 to 1-inch long bell flowers dangle directly from them abundantly, even on young trees. The bells or parasols enclose pretty yellow stamens and pistils, which can be seen when looking into the flowers from below. For the flowers to be best appreciated, the tree should be viewed from fairly close up. The leaves are thin in substance, ovoid with a pointed tip, 2 to 5 inches long and light green in color. In the fall they turn a medium yellow. When the leaves fall off, large green fruits become visible. They are 1 to 1 1/2 inches long and have four distinct vertical wings. They look as if they were designed for flying, but they're so heavy that, as Bill Cullina says, it would take a hurricane to blow them more than a couple feet. As the weather cools, they become dark brown and hang on the tree for most of the winter, a nice ornamental effect.

Halesia tetraptera grows well in zones 4 to 8, in sun or shade.

References:

- Cullina, William. 2002. *Native Trees, Shrubs, and Vines*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
Dirr, Michael. 1997. *Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs*. Timber Press, Portland. TreeTrail.net.

Illustration: from USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. An illustrated flora of the northern United States, Canada and the British Possessions. Vol. 2: 722.

It prefers moist, acidic soil, but is not fussy about moisture. Its only drawback is that the branches are prone to ice damage. This is especially true of multistemmed specimens, so Cullina recommends pruning young trees to a single trunk and staking the trunk to keep it vertical for the first year. A specimen tree will ultimately become 15 to 25 feet tall.

A pink form, 'rosea' or 'Arnold Pink' puts on a particularly pretty spring show. There is a smaller, more shrublike form with larger and showier blossoms called 'Uconn Wedding Bells.' At this point it is not easy to find and appears to be available only by mail order. There are also a couple of forms with variegated leaves. Do not be afraid to order a small specimen, as the Silverbell grows quickly and blooms at an early age.



Propagation:

Propagation is moderately easy from cuttings and considerably more difficult from seed.

By seed:

After the winged capsules have turned brown put them in warm water and soak overnight. The following day squeeze the water out of the seeds, put them in a plastic bag and refrigerate for the winter. In the spring sow the seeds outside in a flat or bed. Seedlings will emerge the following spring. A fifty percent germination rate is usual.

By cuttings:

Take softwood cuttings in spring or early summer. Treat them with 3,000 ppm IBA quick dip and place in potting soil under a plastic bag to retain humidity. Using this hormone is not necessary, but it speeds root growth. As soon as the cuttings are rooted, transfer them to larger pots and grow them on for a year before planting permanently. Young trees should be mulched and kept watered until well established.