



## STYRAX Genus Overview

The genus *Styrax*, or snowbells, is a member of the Styracaceae, the Storax family. It is native to East and Southeast Asia, the Neotropics, as well as a narrow distribution of five species in North America. The genus was first described by Linnaeus in 1753 using *Styrax officinalis*, a species used as an herbal medicine in ancient time and a source of resin. The genus contains approximately 130 species of small to medium multi-stemmed trees and large shrubs. Despite the numerous species very few are in cultivation. The ornamental qualities of *Styrax* do however merit greater use in the landscape. The white bell-shaped flowers that appear in May to June are of “great beauty.” The pendulous flowers abundantly produced in either axillary or in terminal clusters, called racemes, and are typically fragrant. These flowers give *Styrax* its common name of “snowbell.” Although the genus as a whole does not consistently present notable fall color, some species show attractive yellow to red fall color. The habit on *Styrax* can be quite elegant, and it does well in a variety of landscape uses. Presently there are 18 *Styrax* taxa within the living collection at the UDBG.

### 1: *Styrax americanus*

The American Snowbell ranges from North Carolina to Florida, and west to Texas. It is rare in parts of Oklahoma, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. In its native habitat, on streambanks and lowlands, it is often wispy with a sparse canopy and flower production, but in cultivation it is a graceful and full shrub. The white flowers appear in May to June, and the reflexed petals accentuate the bell-shape of the flower. Only reaching 10 feet in height and 8 feet wide, American Snowbell is suited for small-scale landscapes, or massed in larger spaces. Plants are reliably hardy in USDA zone 6 to 9. Plants flourish in cool, moist, and acidic soils to perform at its best. There are two accessions in the Native Garden.

### 2: *Styrax confusus*

Botanist William Hemsley first described this species in 1906, the specific epithet alludes to “confusion,” and yet, it is unclear what was meant by this. Perhaps, Hemsley was confused that this plant was only just being discovered? This species is available commercially in the U.S. It is a small tree with the great ornamental qualities of other *Styrax* species, but is noted to re-bloom in the fall. There are three subspecies of *S. confusus*, with variety *confusus* the likely variety found in cultivation. Despite the commercial availability of *Styrax confusus*, only five institutions in North America have this species, and one of those specimens can be found at the southern end of the Clark Garden at UDBG.

### 3: *Styrax grandifolius*

Bigleaf Snowbell is the only other species of *Styrax* native to the United States held at the UDBG. Its native range is similar to that of *Styrax americanus*, but the Bigleaf Snowbell does not extend as far south in Florida, and is not found in Pennsylvania or Oklahoma. As the specific

epithet and common name imply, the leaves are quite large, reaching up to 7 inches in length! The leaves have a gray pubescence on the underside with additional hairs on young stems and flower buds. Fragrant flowers occur in larger clusters than other species, having as many as 20 flowers within a raceme. Growing to just 12 feet in height, this is another plant that is suitable for smaller landscapes. There is one accession of *Styrax grandifolius* at the south end of the Clark Garden.

#### **4: *Styrax japonicus***

*Styrax japonicus* is the most common species in cultivation in both North American and European gardens. It is a broad rounded large shrub to small tree that reaches 15 to 25 feet in height. Flowers are white and mildly fragrant, in drooping racemes. There are a few dozen cultivars available in the nursery trade, and the ability of *S. japonicus* to hybridize with other species could yield more introductions. The UDBG has two straight species of *S. japonicus* (wild collected) as well as eight unique cultivars. The straight species can be found on the northwest mound outside of Worrihow Hall. The cultivars include ‘Emerald Pagoda’, ‘Evening Light’, and ‘Pink Chimes’ among others.

#### **5: *Styrax obassia***

Commonly called “Fragrant Snowbell”, *Styrax obassia* is one of the more fragrant of the genus. The habit is larger than other species, maturing to a 30 foot small tree. The leaves too are larger than most in the genus, and it has been noted that the leaves “detract from the quality and intensity of the flowers”. The gray bark and twisted stems on older specimens can be of winter interest. This is one of the more cold hardy species, performing well in zones 5 to 8. *Styrax obassia* is a prominent species in cultivation and global collections. Two plants are in the UDBG collection, one in Fischer Greenhouse Garden on the west side, and one at the formal entrance of Townsend Hall.

#### **6: *Styrax hemsleyanus***

This species is named in honor of the aforementioned Kew botanist, William Hemsley, who named *S. confusus*. It is a close relative to *S. obassia*, and is very similar in appearance. *Styrax hemsleyanus* has less pubescent leaves, the buds are darker, and are not hidden under the petiole base. This is native to mountain slopes and forest edges in Central and Western China, and hardy to zones 6 to 7. The flowers are bell shaped and white with cheery yellow stamens on long racemes. Plants grow to 15 to 25 feet in height in cultivation, and only 16 feet wide. There is one *S. hemsleyanus* in the collection, located in the northern end of the Clark Garden.

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**Please reference STYRAX Featured Selections Map pdf  
for locations of these *Styrax* at UDBG.**