



## HIDDEN TREASURES OF THE ARBORETUM

### *Halesia carolina* Carolina silverbell

BY NIALL DUNNE



**W**hen you hear “silver bells,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind? Bing Crosby and Carol Richard’s classic recording of the Jay Livingston/Ray Evans Christmas tune? Or a small group of deciduous trees in the genus *Halesia*?

If it’s the latter, then you just might be a plant nerd!

(Interesting aside: The classic Christmas tune originally started out as “Tinkle Bells,” but then Livingston’s wife, Lynne, reminded her songwriter husband about the double meaning of the word “tinkle.”)



I aspire to plant geekdom, but also know and feel that I still have so much to learn. For example, I only recently became familiar with the lovely Carolina silverbell (*Halesia carolina*) while strolling south down Azalea Way a few summers ago. It was not far past the Hybrid Rhododendron Garden, on the east side of the trail, that I first spied a handsome, 40-foot tree with oval, finely toothed, light-green leaves and stripy, furrowed, beige-and-brown bark.

What drew me over to it, though, were the developing, two-inch-long, four-winged fruit

pods hanging down under the foliage. Though green in color, they reminded me of tropical star fruits at the grocery store. As the season progresses, the fruit pods gradually turn brown and—according to local plant expert Arthur Lee Jacobson, in his magnificent book “North American Landscape Trees”—develop the silvery cast that led to the tree’s common name.

I photographed the pods and the plant tag attached to the trunk—which informed me that the specimen’s scientific name was *Halesia tetraptera* (more on this below)—and added the

**LEFT:** Furrowed bark.

**RIGHT:** Maturing seedpods.

**LOWER LEFT:** Foliage and flowers.

**LOWER RIGHT:** Mature seedpods, with silvery cast.

tree to my article list of possible plants to profile in the “Bulletin.”

Later that year, at our magazine’s fall editorial board meeting, Walt Bubelis—a true plant guru—asked me why I had listed *Halesia* as a “summer-interest” tree. It blooms in spring, he informed me.

I was bit flustered. If I’d done my research right after seeing the plant, like a proper arborophile, I wouldn’t have made such an error. I was determined to improve myself so, the following spring, I kept a close eye on the *Halesia*.

When it’s stunning, white, pendant, bell-shaped flowers appeared in clusters on the branches in early May, I was blown away by their beauty. They looked like snowdrops with yellow centers—and, actually, snowdrop tree is another common name for the genus *Halesia*.

Depending on who you ask, the genus is comprised of three to five species. One of them, *Halesia macgregorii*, Chinese silverbell, is endemic to southeastern China and is threatened by habitat loss in its home range. The others are all native to eastern North America.

If you search for *Halesia* on the Arboretum’s digital map ([depts.washington.edu/uwbg/gardens/map.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/uwbg/gardens/map.shtml)), you’ll see 20 specimens growing in various parts of the park, most of them named *Halesia tetraptera* or *Halesia monticola*. But that’s not what they’re called anymore. Their species status has been revoked—and three of the eastern trees have now become one.

“It’s quite an interesting species taxonomically,” says UW Botanic Gardens Curator Ray Larson. “Both *Halesia monticola* and *H. tetraptera* have now been sunk into another species, *H. carolina*. Flower display and wing size on fruits was noted as a key factor in differences between

*H. monticola* and *H. tetraptera*, with *monticola* apparently being more floriferous, of greater size, and more tree-like. However, botanical taxonomists don’t recognize these differences as significant enough to delineate distinct species.”

“Horticulturally, they appear distinct, and sometimes these differences are acknowledged using a ‘group’ designation. The Arboretum *Halesia* specimens tend to be more treelike and upright—with larger flowers, which is a characteristic of the Vestita Group. The specimen on the east side of Azalea Way was received as seed from the Morris Arboretum in 1949 and, at the time, they named it *H. monticola* var. *vestita*. We’ll need to relabel this one and most of the others, and the new name will likely be *H. carolina* Vestita Group.”

This article keeps getting nerdier by the second! Taxonomy aside, you won’t be disappointed if you visit the *Halesia* in the Arboretum, regardless of what we end up calling them. If the flowers remind you of the popular Japanese snowbell tree (*Styrax japonicus*), you might be interested to know that *Halesia* and *Styrax* are close cousins in the family Styracaceae.

I haven’t seen the Azalea Way specimen in fall, but apparently the leaves turn an attractive yellow before dropping. Getting photos of the foliage is one of the next assignments I’m giving myself on my path to botanical sainthood. Oh, and I also want to visit our single specimen of *Halesia diptera* over to the east of the Camellia Collection. This is the only *Halesia* out of the 20 in the collection that won’t be needing a new tag. It’s called the two-wing silverbell, due to the fact that its fruit pods have two wings instead of four (like all other *Halesia*). And I can tell you, as a “wannabe” botanical wiz, that this trait makes the species designation an absolute keeper. Maybe... 🌿

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