

## Saruma henryi: The Intriguing History Behind its Name

by Paige Embry

**T**HANKS TO 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, all living organisms are precisely and uniquely identified with a two-part name composed of genus and species. Gardeners use these botanical names all the time, but we don't always find out the interesting history behind them.

### HONORING A TAX COLLECTOR

Recently I learned the back story to the botanical name for upright wild ginger (*Saruma henryi*, USDA Hardiness Zones 4–8, AHS Heat Zones 8–3), a woodland plant in the arum family. It's closely related to the genus *Asarum*, although other than heart-shaped leaves, there's no great resemblance evident between plants in the two genera. But look closely at the two genus names and you'll notice that *Saruma* is an anagram formed by taking the "A" off the front of *Asarum* and adding it on the back end of the name.

The specific epithet, *henryi*, pays tribute to the plant's Western discoverer, Augustine Henry, an Irish medical officer for the Imperial Maritime Customs Service in China in the late 19th century.

The Service got its start in 1853 during the Taiping Rebellion, when local Chinese officials in Shanghai fled and, as a consequence, stopped collecting taxes. Treaties required the Europeans in Shanghai to pay taxes, so naturally they took over the job of collecting their own taxes, impressing the Chinese with their efficiency. When the rebellion ended in 1854, the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, a new branch of the Chinese government run primarily by the British, was created. Much of the early Western understanding of China came from those working in the Service, among them Augustine Henry.

As a medical officer, Henry was charged with collecting taxes on medicinal plants shipped down the Yangtze River. Entranced with the plants, Henry started



Upright wild ginger features light green leaves and pale yellow flowers starting in spring.

botanizing in his off hours and sending specimens back to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England. By the time Henry left China in 1900, he had sent nearly 16,000 herbarium specimens to Kew. Among them was *Saruma henryi*.

### WOODLAND GEM

An herbaceous perennial, the shoots of upright wild ginger emerge a sumptuous velvety silver in spring, gradually opening

into large, heart-shaped leaves that glow pale green at maturity. The plant stands one to two feet tall and slowly forms a clump with an equal or slightly greater spread. Its small, three-petaled, medium-yellow flowers bloom just above the foliage starting in late spring and extending into summer. Where conditions are to its liking, it may self-sow.

In its native habitat in China, upright wild ginger grows in shady areas that receive regular moisture. In the cool, maritime Northwest where I live, it can take a surprising amount of drought, once established. But in regions with warmer summers, such as the Southeast, it prefers full shade and regular watering.

If you end up growing this little Asian jewel, remember the origin of its name and the strange story of how the British ended up running a Chinese agency in order to collect taxes on themselves.

### Sources

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