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The (Un)Conquering of Daphne

By Lydia Holley

Daphne, in Greek mythology, was one of several nymphs in authority over fresh water. These fresh water bodies included bubbling springs, babbling brooks, fountains, and streams. The god Apollo became infatuated with Daphne, who resisted his affections. Apollo's love was due to Cupid's mischievous actions, so his approaches only became more forceful. To keep from falling prey to Apollo's advances, Daphne cried out to her father, the river god. The solution her father chose was an unusual and creative one: he turned her into a laurel tree. Poor Apollo - the spell from Cupid remained. Still in love, but now with a plant, he used laurel wreaths to crown victors.



Pictured: Blooms of *Daphne odorata*

The famous sculpture by Bernini shows Apollo ready to pounce on his chosen, only to have Daphne already beginning to make the metamorphosis. The sculptor shows one hand changed into laurel twigs, with leaves instead of fingers, and her feet turning to roots. It is apparent the rest of Daphne will soon follow in this transformation.

Like Apollo, gardeners lust after Daphne. *Daphne odorata* is perhaps the best known species from the genus Daphne. It grows and blooms in shade, and has an alluring scent. One of its most tantalizing qualities is that this evergreen shrub blooms in winter. Few gardeners can resist planting such a tempting plant. With Daphne, however, like Apollo, many times the gardener is thwarted. Daphnes are notoriously difficult to grow and hate to be moved.

Edgeworthia chrysantha is related to Daphne, but is somewhat easier to grow. It also blooms in winter and has a lovely scent. Be forewarned, however, you can not treat this deciduous shrub with disrespect. It appreciates good soil, and does not like to be moved.

The most popular of the laurels is *Laurus nobilis*. You may know it as the bay laurel or sweet bay, and may even use its leaves in cooking. Although this small tree grows in zone 8-10, it is best to place it where it is protected from north winds and hard freezes. I have heard of both gardeners that have had this plant in their garden for many years, and those that have tried numerous times to no avail.

Should you choose to grow a plant related to Daphne, remember, she is an alluring nymph that may turn on you just as you begin to think you have her conquered.

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