

A Cool Leopard of a Plant

One challenge all gardeners battle is the ever-changing botanical name of plants. Through recent genetic studies or improved understanding of who initially named the plant, a well-known and long standing species or genus name is subject to change. One plant that intrigued me early in my career was Leopard Plant, *Ligularia tussilaginea*, which over the past 20 years suddenly transitioned to *Farfugium japonicum*.

As the species epithet indicates, *Farfugium japonicum* is native to Japan and Asia, where it inhabits moist meadows and stream banks. The convoluted story of this plants' name started with Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), who named it *Tussilago japonica* in 1767. *Tussilago* comes from the Greek *Tussis*, to cough and *Ago*, meaning to act upon. Linnaeus believed this was an Asian relative of the European native, *Tussilago farfara* or Coltsfoot, which herbalists used to treat coughs. In fact, it was Gaius Plinius Secundus (23-79AD), a Roman naturalist better known as Pliny the Elder, who not only wrote of its use as a cough remedy, but penned the name *Farfarus* and *Farfugium* as the name for Coltsfoot! Due to poor communications that besieged 19th Century, the plant was 'rediscovered' by the Scottish botanist and plant hunter Robert Fortune (1812-1880) and in 1855 was named *Ligularia tussilaginea* by the Russian physician and botanist, Emil Bretschneider (1833-1901), who was fascinated with and studied the culture of China. *Ligularia* comes from the Latin *Ligula*, meaning strap and refers to the narrow, strap-like flower petals displayed by the 120+ species of this genus. Once again proving that 'old' is now 'new', *Farfugium* was once again brought back to life and documented in 1857 as the proper genus name by the English botanist John Lindley (1799-1865). However, it was not until 1939 that Siro Kitamura (1906-2002), the Director of the Botanical Institute at Kyoto University finally and properly described the plant as *Farfugium japonicum*. The split from *Ligularia* has been further substantiated by more recent studies on the differences in the number and shape of the chromosomes. Interestingly, it required over 50 years of the plant being in commerce before the transition to the proper name finally occurred within the nursery and gardening world!

Regardless of the ever-changing stream of botanical names, the structure of the flower did not change and it consistently remained a member of the asteraceae or sunflower family! *Farfugium japonicum* is a clump forming perennial, growing to 2' in diameter. Plants flourish in evenly moist, lightly shaded locations and sport yellow, 1-2" diameter flowers atop 2' leafless stems during the fall.



However, it is the attractive and bold foliage that elevates the plant to garden worthy stature. The glossy, heart-shaped and dark green foliage is upwards of 12” in diameter, with a thick, leathery texture that beckons the gardener to touch the foliage. Bold foliage is always a much needed element for gardeners and, even though its zone 7-10 hardiness precludes it from permanent planting in more northern gardens, it makes a great container plant that can be brought indoors for the winter months. If even bolder foliage is of need, consider the varietal form *Giganteum* (pictured above at right), whose foliage grows to an eye catching 18” in diameter!



Farfugium has many cultivar options too! The cultivar ‘Cristata’ (pictured above) sports crested,



wavy margins on silvery-green foliage, presenting very attractive textural qualities much like giant parsley! For those gardeners who are looking for foliar color to brighten that shady corner, consider the cultivar ‘Argenteum’ (pictured at left), which has bold silvery-white margins that vary from a fraction to well over 2” wide on the same leaf! It looks great when combined with water features or in a bright, sunlight corner of the home

during winter. However, the form that I have always found attractive is the selection ‘Aureomaculatum’ (picture below at right). The foliage is randomly splashed with numerous ¼-½” yellow dots that have a blurred or fuzzy margin with the surround green foliage. It is undoubtedly this form that led to the common name, since they loosely resemble the spots on a Leopard! It has also received the Royal Horticultural Society Award of Garden Merit. Granted, this is not a selection for everyone, since some folks believe it had the misfortune of being located too close to a sloppy painter and the colorful leaves lack any garden merit whatsoever! However, in my humble opinion, it does provide a great eye-catching touch for the Garden and blends very well with plants sporting yellow flowers or chartreuse foliage.

Obviously, the battle of keeping up with the proper name of your favorite plant will certainly not subside in the years to come as the reading of a plants' genetics becomes more widespread. However, by whatever name – and furthermore, for whichever selection you choose – Leopard Plant is a wonderful and 'cool' addition for both your home and Garden!

