

# Storm Warning: Reinventing Flowering Quince

Dr. Thomas G. Ranney, Professor of Horticultural Science, NC State University

The mention of flowering quinces (*Chaenomeles* spp.) evokes images and memories of quintessential, spring-flowering, heirloom plants. Old fashioned? Definitely. Flowering quinces are known to have been cultivated for over 400 years, but admiration for quinces certainly dates back thousands of years. A member of the rose family, flowering quinces are spring show stoppers that usher in the growing season with the likes of magnolias, flowering cherries, and forsythias.

Flowering quinces make up a relatively small genus consisting of just three species: Japanese flowering quince (*C. japonica*), common flowering quince (*C. speciosa*), and the Cathay flowering quince (*C. cathayensis*). Although Japanese flowering quince is probably the most refined of the group, forming a small spreading shrub with less intimidating spines, the flowers tend to be small and limited in color from salmon to orange. The cultivar 'Sargentii' is fairly typical of the true Japanese flowering quince. In contrast, the Cathay flowering quince is a beast. This small tree has spines that could be wielded like a medieval weapon. Despite the attractive pink flowers, unless you have an ongoing feud with your neighbor, you probably want to leave this one for Genghis Khan. The real magic of flowering quinces, however, lies within the common flowering quinces that sport large flowers, in a diverse palette of colors, including streaked petals and flowers that transition in color with age (e.g., 'Toyo-Nishiki'). If five petals aren't enough for you, the common flowering quinces have spawned a number of variants with extra-petaled, double flowers.

Now, where it really gets exciting, is that all three of these species hybridize and give rise to fertile progeny. Many desirable hybrids have come from melding *C. japonica* and *C. speciosa* into the hybrid grex, *C. ×superba*. However, every possible combination of these three species has been bred, including the three-species hybrid, dubbed *C. ×californica*. When con-

sidering the attributes of all three species, the potential for combining desirable traits from this group are considerable. This opportunity has not gone unnoticed. Since the introduction of flowering quinces in Europe during the late 18th century, over 500 cultivars [see Weber, C. 1963. Cultivars in the genus *Chaenomeles*. *Arnoldia* 23(3):17-75] have been selected and named, including many hybrids. As is the case for fashion and horticulture, the popularity of flowering quinces has waxed and waned over time, and today there are generally just a handful of cultivars readily available in the trade.

So, is this genus tapped out? Are there new opportunities for breeding improved flowering quinces? Close to 10 years ago, Don Shadow, owner of Shadow Nursery in Winchester, TN, graciously shared with us a plant of *C. speciosa* 'Dragon's Blood'. This impressive plant has a number of desirable traits. The flower color is a dark red (like Dragon's Blood), the stems are thornless, and the flowers are heavy doubles that look amazingly like miniature roses. As we were just starting a breeding program at the time, we couldn't resist moving some pollen around with the hopes of developing new flowering quinces with a range of flower colors, thornless stems, and high petal counts. We were presently surprised at the results and are pleased to introduce three new flowering quinces - the likes of which are unlike what you might know as flowering quinces.

*Chaenomeles speciosa*  
'Pink Storm'



***Chaenomeles speciosa* 'Scarlet Storm' PPAF** – A medium-sized, upright to rounded, multi-stemmed shrub with a mature height of approximately 6 feet. Large (2 to 2.5 inches in diameter), scarlet red, double flowers with 17 to 25 petals per flower. Fruitless (traded pistils in for more petals) and thornless (no more bloodletting). Unlike many flowering quinces, 'Scarlet Storm' tends to have flowers out to the tips of its branches.



***Chaenomeles speciosa*** 'Orange Storm'

***Chaenomeles speciosa*** 'Pink Storm' PPAF – A medium-sized, upright to rounded, multi-stemmed shrub with a mature height of approximately 6 feet. Large, 2 inches in diameter, pink, double

flowers with 29-40 petals per flower. Fruitless and thornless. Flowers resemble sweetheart roses.

***Chaenomeles speciosa*** 'Orange Storm' PPAF – A medium-sized, upright to rounded, multi-stemmed shrub with a mature height of approximately 6 feet. Large (1.75 to 2.5 inches in diameter), double flowers with 31-49 frilly petals per flower. Fruitless and thornless. Flowers are like orange petticoats.

If you would like more information on growing or trialing these plants, contact Tom Ranney, [tom\\_ranney@ncsu.edu](mailto:tom_ranney@ncsu.edu), 828-684-3562.

***Acknowledgements.*** *These plants were developed through the hard work and assistance of Tom Eaker, Joel Mowrey, Nathan Lynch, and the Staff of the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research Station, Mills River, NC. Support, in part, for the development of these plants came from NC State University, The North Carolina Nursery and Landscape Association, Spring Meadow Nursery, and Mr. Don Shadow of Shadow Nursery – thank you all for supporting our work.*