

Heptacodium

--Great Any Season, But Spectacular in Early Fall.

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Heptacodium miconioides or seven-sons-flower is a multi-trunk small tree, native to China. In addition to its small tree stature, it has many other qualities to make it an excellent landscape plant.



Unlike many other small trees with very specific requirements, *Heptacodium* performs well over a wide range of soil conditions and is cold hardy from at least zones 5 – 8. It has performed well in North-Central Oklahoma during record setting summers for heat and drought, with no leaf scorch or tatter and in moderately alkaline soils ranging from sandy to moderately heavy clay. Grow rate is moderate to rapid, depending on soil fertility and moisture. On Feb. 11, 2011, when temperatures dropped to -19 F, none of the seven trees showed any injury. After 9 years of research in Oklahoma, it has had no insect or disease problems on the flowers, foliage or twigs. Drift of 2, 4-D in early spring causes a narrow blackening along leaf margins, but with little distortion. However, slightly later in the growing season, when damage is evident on new growth of redbud, *Heptacodium* shows none. Growth and flowering is best in full sun, however, it will tolerate moderate shade, but with fewer flowers.

Leaves are simple and opposite and appear early, but have considerable tolerance for late spring freezes. Leaves range from 1.5 to 2 inches wide and 3 to 5 inches long, are medium to dark green, and develop only slight

yellow fall color before dropping. Young twigs are purplish on sides exposed to sun and medium green in shade. Bark begins to peel on branches about ½ to ¾ inches in diameter and continues with increasing size. Freshly exposed bark is smooth, light tan to purplish, reminiscent to crapemyrtle. Multiple stems are predominant, creating a uniform crown. Some annual pruning is required to maintain a single stem or given number of stems and exposure of the attractive bark. *Heptacodium* typically reaches a height of 18 to 20 feet, with a 12 to 16 foot spread.

Flower bud development begins in May, but flowering does not occur until late August or early September. The showy and fragrant white flowers provide color when few other species are blooming in zones 5 and 6, and complement the late summer flowering of crapemyrtle. Interestingly, flower development progresses similarly in southern Wisconsin and Oklahoma which suggests triggering results from photoperiod rather than temperature. While the white flowers are showy for 7 to 10 days, the sepals are small and light green. However, once flowers fall, sepals expand and turn red – wine with some variations among seedlings. From flower fall to good sepal color show requires about 7 to 10 days. Color show in the landscape from sepals is more dramatic than the flowers. Sepals on some seedlings remain showy until a hard freeze occurs. It is also important to note that when the red-purple sepals are viewed with the sun at your back, they are not nearly as colorful as when you are looking into the sun as the light coming through the sepals makes a huge difference in appearance.

Heptacodium is native to China, but now appears to exist only in a limited number of gardens and perhaps only as a result of asexual propagation. It was first reported by E.H. Wilson while exploring on behalf of the Arnold Arboretum in 1909. However, plants established at the arboretum remained in obscurity until noticed by J.C. Ralston from NC State University who took cuttings and successfully produced new plants for general distribution.