

# Mahonia eurybracteta

## 'Soft Caress'



*Introducing a soft, mounding evergreen that grows even in dry shade*

Jimmy Turner

Our Dallas Arboretum trial gardens are widely known for our flowering annual trials and maybe even for our bulb trials, but few know that we also are constantly evaluating new shrubs for their adaptability to Texas gardens. A few years back, I received samples of a new mahonia from the Novalis "Plants That Work" group. At first sight, my horticultural curiosity was piqued! *Mahonia eurybractea* 'Soft Caress' not only was a new species I'd never grown, it also was so appealing it was almost pet-able!

Mahonia 'Soft Caress' is a new selection from Japan with softly divided foliage that is more reminiscent of ferns or bamboo than other mahonias. 'Soft Caress' forms 3- to 4-foot-tall mounds of soft, non-prickly foliage in partial to light shade. In early winter, buttery yellow fingers of flowers crown plants for several weeks and are followed by large clusters of frosted-blue-colored berries. Though this new variety looks soft and cuddly, it's just as tough as other mahonias, making it the perfect choice for that bane of all gardeners – dry shade. The mere words strike fear in nurserymen everywhere!

This mahonia will stand up to moister shade conditions, too. And the fine texture of 'Soft Caress' will be a complement to the coarser textures of other mahonia varieties.

I've found that 'Soft Caress' mahonia combines wonderfully with the strap-like tropical foliage of plants like cast iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*) or Chinese sacred lily (*Rhodea japonica*). It also partners perfectly in dry shade with those stalwarts of the shade garden: holly (*Ilex* sp.), heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*)

and holly fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum*). While testing this new shrub, I discovered 'Soft Caress' is an incredible container plant. The clumping habit and soft feathery foliage lend a tropical fern-like feeling to shade containers, and the evergreen foliage and golden flowers make this an excellent choice for winter pots.

If you're looking for something a little different for your shade garden, I suggest you hunt down some 'Soft Caress' this winter. This mahonia should be available in retail nurseries statewide in 1- to 5-gallon containers, and this time of year is a perfect time to add them to your garden. ★

*About the author: Jimmy Turner is senior director of gardens at the Dallas Arboretum and a contributing editor to this publication. Visit [www.dallasplanttrials.org](http://www.dallasplanttrials.org) for more information on his trials.*



JIMMY TURNER

*Buttery yellow fingers of flowers crown 'Soft Caress' plants for several weeks in early winter.*

AT A GLANCE

**Latin name:** *Mahonia eurybractea* 'Soft Caress'

**Common name:** 'Soft Caress' mahonia

**Plant type:** Evergreen shrub

**Blooming season:** November to February

**Flowers:** Bright yellow

**Foliage:** Soft, textured mounds

**Mature height:** 4 ft. tall by 3 ft. wide

**Spacing:** 3 ft.

**Hardiness:** Zone 7

**Soil:** Well-drained

**Exposure:** Partial shade

**Water usage:** Low to medium

**Sources:** Local nurseries

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