Fatsia

Fatsia (*Fatsia japonica*) is also known as Japanese fatsia, indicating its origin. It is a highly popular shrub in the Southeast due to its adaptability and tropical appearance along with good cold tolerance. It will grow throughout South Carolina with the exception of areas in the mountains that occasionally drop to below 10 °F.

**Mature Height/Spread**
Fatsia typically grows 6 to 10 feet tall by 6 to 10 feet wide. Old plants in ideal growing conditions may reach 15 feet tall.

**Growth Rate**
Fatsia grows at a moderate to fast rate (8 to 12 inches per year) depending on growing conditions. Growth will be slower in full sun and dry soil, and faster in shade with rich, moist soil.

**Ornamental Features**
Fatsia is grown primarily as an evergreen foliage plant. The leaves are large, ranging from 6 to 14 or more inches wide, with 7 to 9 deep lobes per leaf. It has a very tropical appearance due to the bold, dark green, shiny foliage. A few cultivars have variegated leaves.

Multiple, usually unbranched stems shoot up from the base of the plant with several new stems added each year. Plants usually have an overall rounded form. Fatsia growing in crowded conditions will be more upright in form. Occasionally, very large fatsias are trained to a single stem, providing an unusual tree-like appearance.

Flowers are white, held in large, dramatic clusters of rounded umbels (group of flowers radiating from a central point) above the foliage. They appear in October to November and last for several weeks.

The flowers produce green berries that mature to shiny black during early to mid winter in the Upstate and mid to late winter along the coast. Berries last well on the plants, unless eaten by birds. Hard freezes will eventually cause the berry clusters to collapse.
Mature black berries in winter. 
Joey Williamson, ©2010 HGIC, Clemson Extension

**Landscape Use**

Fatsia is especially well suited to shade gardens where a dramatic, tropical look is desired. While it can grow quite large, it is possible to fit it into smaller areas by removing older, large stems each year.

**Culture**

Preferred growing conditions include moist, but well-drained, acidic soil rich in organic matter. Shade or dappled shade is necessary for best foliage appearance. Fatsia will grow well even in deep shade. Despite its preferences fatsia will tolerate sandy or heavy clay soils, moderate drought and air pollution. These qualities make it an ideal plant for urban areas in shade. Excessive wind exposure or full sun will cause leaf injury.

Fatsias grow well outside in large containers and are often used for indoor landscaping or as houseplants.

Fatsias can be pruned by either of two methods. They can be rejuvenated to produce dense branching by cutting back all stems by several feet in late winter before growth begins. This produces very full foliage. Alternatively, up to one third of the individual stems can be removed all the way to the base at any time from late winter to late summer. If the oldest, tallest stems are removed, this will maintain the plant at a smaller size. Individual stems can also be removed to give a more open, sculptural or upright habit.

Fertilize fatsias lightly in the spring once the last frost is past. Use a slow-release tree and shrub fertilizer, such as a 12-6-6, and follow label directions.

Mature fatsia are difficult to transplant. Consider pruning to make the plant fit better in its site, or replace with a better adapted plant.

Plants can be propagated from fresh seed after the fleshy black fruit wall is removed. They grow best with bottom heat of 80 °F. Seed typically germinates in 2 to 4 weeks. Most plants are grown from seed.

Cuttings can be taken in mid to late summer after wood has firmed. Use a rooting hormone, bottom heat and either mist or a poly tent (clear plastic cover) to maintain humidity. Reduce leaf area by trimming outer areas of large leaves to cut moisture loss. Cuttings are the only way to reproduce variegated cultivars true to type.

**Problems**

Fatsia rarely have any serious insect or disease problems.

Scale, aphids, mealybugs and spider mites are occasional pests of fatsia. They can all be controlled with horticultural oil sprays. Spider mites usually occur when plants are grown in overly dry or sunny conditions.

Fatsia flowers attract an assortment of pollinating insects, including beneficial parasitic and predaceous wasps, which reduce the population of many harmful insects. This may mean locating the plants away from outdoor living areas used in the fall if someone is allergic to stinging insects.

Occasional bacterial and fungal leaf spots may be seen on plants growing in crowded situations or with poor air circulation or frequent overhead irrigation. The best remedies are to remove any heavily spotted leaves and improve the growing conditions. If necessary, a copper-based fungicide can be applied as per label instructions.

Phytophthora root rot may infect plants in sites with poorly drained conditions.
Cultivars & Related Species

Fatsia cultivars are difficult to find in retail garden centers, and will usually need to be ordered from specialty mail order nurseries.

- ‘Variegata’ has irregularly white-edged leaves and is one of the more attractive cultivars. White edges will brown in excess sun.
- 'Spider's Web' fatsia has heavy white speckling over the entire leaf and pale leaf veins. The variegation may take several years to reach full effect.
- ‘Annelise’ has large golden yellow and lime green splotches covering most of the leaf surface.

Fatshedera lizei is an intergeneric hybrid between fatsia and English ivy. It is intermediate in characteristics between both plants. It normally grows as a spreading to vining shrub with many upright stems 3 to 5 feet tall. It also can be trained onto a wall or other sturdy support up to 10 feet or more. Unlike ivy, its attachments are weak, and it will need some fasteners to climb. Leaves are smaller and not as deeply lobed as fatsia. It usually has only 5 lobes. Like fatsia and English ivy, this vine prefers a shady site. These hybrid vines are easy to propagate from cuttings in the summer.

- ‘Aurea Maculata’ is the most commonly seen cultivar, even more common than the plain green plant. Irregular light yellow to lime green markings spread out from the center and veins of the leaves.
- ‘Angyo Star’ has bright to pale yellow edges on each leaf.

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This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.