Golden Japanese Spikenard
‘Sun King’
(Aralia cordata)
2020 Perennial Plant of the Year
International Hardy Plant Union Outstanding Plant Award in 2012.

3’x3’ (occasionally taller) impressive sturdy mounded perennial that looks like a shrub during the growing season. Grows quickly each season. Native to Japan, Korea, and China. Found in shady forested areas and grassy slopes.

Glowing golden-leaved cultivar, with tiers of very large and wide compound leaves (up to 3’), holding 3-7 paired heart-shaped finely-toothed ovate heart-shaped leaflets, 2-6” long, on contrasting red-maroon zigzag stems. Leaves are brighter yellow in part sun, more chartreuse or lime green in full shade.

Many long branched 2’ tall showy panicle clusters of little white flowers, high above foliage, on strong stems, July-September.

Numerous dense hanging clusters of long-lasting very showy glistening red-purple to purplish-black (inedible) berries, in late summer and fall.

Part shade to shade. At its best with a little dappled morning sun. Average soil with good drainage, prefers moist rich humusy soil. Easy to grow, low maintenance. Not drought tolerant. Protect from strong winds. Since the plant has a tap root, give consideration to initial site placement.

A bold and architectural accent in shady areas. Use as a unique eye-catching specimen, in small groups, in woodland areas, at the backs of perennial borders, or at the front of shrub borders, or for filling in large areas. Sun King’s brightness highlights dark plants if placed behind them. Complements dark reds and purples. Excellent behind ferns and hostas.

Historic use: Called Udo in Japan, the plant was cultivated there for its young shoots, which were considered a culinary delicacy, with taste resembling lemony asparagus. The white fleshy roots have been eaten as one would a parsnip. Leaves may be eaten as a vegetable when young. It is recommended that research be done on preparation, if you want to cook with it.

Berries attractive to birds, including thrushes.

Deer resistant.

Photos 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10: JC Raulston Arboretum, North Carolina State University jcra.ncsu.edu/resources/photographs/plants-results.php?serial=119435
Photos 2, 7, 9: Mark Dwyer, Director of Horticulture, Rotary Botanical Gardens rotarybotanicalgardens.org/all-hail-the-sun-king-aralia/
Photo 5: The Morton Arboretum mortonarb.org/trees-plants/tree-plant-descriptions/japanese-spikenard