Introduction

This tough, very slow-growing evergreen shrub tolerates a wide range of soils, performs well in deep shade, and has attractive glossy green leaves and bright-red fruit (Fig. 1). The variegated forms brighten any area in the landscape with deep shade. Leaf variegation differs dramatically from plant to plant; some have leaves with only a few flecks of yellow, whereas others seem to have yellow leaves with a few flecks of green. Leaves on plants receiving sun in the summer or winter will become chlorotic.

General Information

Scientific name: Aucuba japonica  
Pronunciation: aw-KEW-buh juh-PAW-nick-uh  
Common name(s): Aucuba, Japanese Acuba, Japanese Laurel  
Family: Cornaceae  
Plant type: shrub  
USDA hardiness zones: 7B through 9 (Fig. 2)  
Planting month for zone 7: year round  
Planting month for zone 8: year round  
Planting month for zone 9: year round  
Origin: not native to North America  
Uses: mass planting; container or above-ground planter; foundation; cut foliage/twigs; accent  
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

Description

Height: 3 to 8 feet

Spread: 3 to 4 feet  
Plant habit: round; oval; upright  
Plant density: moderate  
Growth rate: slow  
Texture: coarse  

Foliage

Figure 1. Aucuba.
Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite  
Leaf type: simple  
Leaf margin: serrate  
Leaf shape: ovate  
Leaf venation: pinnate  
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen  
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches  
Leaf color: variegated  
Fall color: no fall color change  
Fall characteristic: not showy

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; not particularly showy  
Current year stem/twig color: green  
Current year stem/twig thickness: very thick

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in the shade  
Soil tolerances: slightly alkaline; clay; sand; acidic; loam  
Drought tolerance: moderate  
Soil salt tolerances: poor  
Plant spacing: 24 to 36 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem  
Winter interest: no special winter interest  
Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding  
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive  
Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests
Use and Management

Aucubas prefer a rich, sandy loam with some organic matter but they will adapt successfully to a heavier soil as long as drainage is good. They are best when used in mass, planted close together because they grow so slowly. Plant two to three feet apart for the best landscape effect. Pruning is seldom necessary because of the slow growth rate. The irregular, multistemmed habit of growth makes Aucuba a natural for informal plantings, while the dense, compact form makes it useful as a free-standing specimen in small areas. Only female plants bear red berries in fall and winter, provided there is a male plant close by. Aucuba makes a nice house plant, and it performs well in a container in the shade.

Cultivars include ‘Crotonifolia’ with white-spotted leaves; ‘Goldieana’ with mostly yellow leaves; ‘Nana’ with a compact, dwarf form; and ‘Variegata’ with yellow-spotted leaves.

Propagation is by cuttings.

Soil nematodes and scales can be a problem, with the resultant sooty mold blackening the leaves.

Pests and Diseases

No diseases are of major concern.