

Dogwoods, Selected Species

Family: *Cornaceae*

Pagoda Dogwood- *Cornus alternifolia*

Silky Dogwood- *Cornus amomum*,

Flowering Dogwood- *Cornus florida*

Gray Dogwood- *Cornus racemosa*,

Red Twiggged (osier) Dogwood- *Cornus sericea (stolonifera)*

By Cheryl Cadwell

One of our loveliest native plants is *Cornus florida*, Flowering Dogwood. It has come to be a universal symbol that spring has arrived. Native Americans used its flowering as a sign to start planting corn, and Thomas Jefferson decreed it his favorite tree and planted it throughout Monticello. But due to loss of habitat and the introduced disease anthracnose, it is disappearing from the wild. *C. florida* is also vulnerable to the stresses of heat, drought and the more modern problems of pollution, acid rain and road salt. Disease- and stress-resistant varieties have been developed, and hence *C. florida* may regain its status as a herald to spring.

Cornus, which means *horned*, refers to the way the tree grows from a forked trunk. *C. florida* may reach a height of 30 feet, with an equal or greater spread. Its leaves are opposite, simple 3- to 6-inch leaves with an oval shape. The autumn foliage is bright and vibrant in shades of red or reddish purple. Its showy white flowers, which appear before the leaves, are actually four white bracts that surround the small, yellowish-green flowers. Bright, shiny red fruits follow the flowers. The fruits have a high fat content and are an important part of the diet of migrating birds.

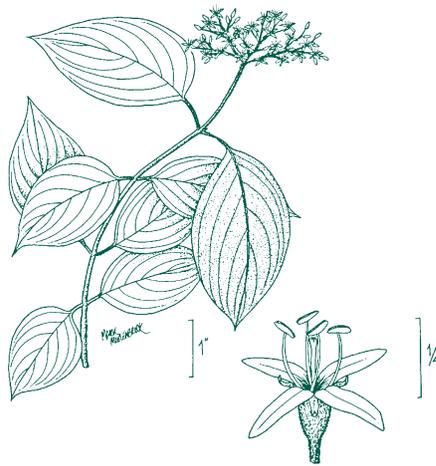
Other members of the *Cornus* family

While not as spectacular as *C. florida*, many other members of the *Cornus* family add color and character to our woodlands.

Cornus alternifolia, Pagoda Dogwood, is a lovely substitute for *C. florida*. Hardy to zone 4, it may reach a height of 20 feet but usually stays around 12 to 15 feet. Its tiered branching gives an open look to the tree. Unlike the other *Cornus* species, *C. alternifolia*'s leaves have a simple elliptical shape and are arranged in an alternating pattern. In fall the leaves are a mix of bright



Cornus florida
Flowering Dogwood



Cornus amomum
Silky Dogwood

yellow, reddish purple and red. In May or early June small white, flat flower clusters are borne on the end of the branches, giving the tree the appearance of a delicate petticoat. The tree gives off a very light fragrance. The blue-black fruits mature in late July and are supported by a coral red stalk. Birds quickly eat the fruits, but the stalks remain, adding to the seasonal attractiveness of the tree.

C. amomum, *C. racemosa*, and *C. sericea (stolonifera)* all have similar leaf, flower and bark characteristics. The dull gray-green leaves are branched in an opposite formation. The flowers are produced at the end of the stem and are flat clusters of creamy white flowers. All three are shrubby in nature, rarely reaching more than 10 to 12 feet in height, and quickly spread to form large "thickets." They are excellent plants to use for naturalizing an area.

Cornus amomum, *Silky Dogwood*, has red-purple stems bearing silky gray hairs and clusters of dark blue fruit, which are quickly eaten by birds.

Cornus racemosa, *Gray Dogwood*, is a suckering shrub with a distinctly multi-stemmed habit. Fruits mature to a creamy white. The reddish pink pedicels supporting them add to the attractiveness of the plant. More drought tolerant than other dogwoods, *C. racemosa* works well in any landscape.

Cornus sericea (stolonifera), *Red-twigged Dogwood*, is also a suckering shrub, but its tolerance of full sun and bright red stems make a useful and striking addition to any landscape. Cutting out old stems every other year

will maintain the bright coloration.

General Habitat: All the *Cornus* species are woodland plants. They grow best in moist acidic soils in partial shade. If in full sun, they need to be watered regularly. *Vascular Flora of Rhode Island* officially designates them as native shrubs and most are facultative wetland species (NS FACW).

Propagation

Cuttings: Dogwoods can be propagated by softwood cuttings taken in the spring. The cuttings need to be kept moist and protected from the sun.

Seeds: Propagating dogwoods from seeds is somewhat easy and generally successful. In late summer collect the ripened seeds. The fruit will have turned a brilliant red and begin to fall from the tree. Soak the fruit in water for a few days to soften the pulp. Rub off the pulp and remove the inner seeds. Clean off all the pulp and stratify the seeds. To stratify: Place the seeds in a plastic bag in a mixture of moist, but not wet peat moss. Close the bag and poke a few holes in it. This allows for some air exchange and helps to prevent mold. Store this bag at room temperature in a dim location for 3 months. After this time place the bag in your refrigerator for another 3 months. Check the bag periodically to make sure the seeds do not dry out. After this 6-month period the seeds are ready to be plant-

ed outside. During the cold storage, some of the seeds may sprout. Plant them outside immediately and cover with a mulch. When planting them outside, just place the seeds on the surface of the soil and sprinkle them with a light covering of soil. Do not plant them too deeply. Water frequently, but do not overwater. Once seedlings appear, keep them in filtered light. Avoid full sun.

References

Gould, Lisa L., et.al. 1998. *Vascular Flora of Rhode Island: A List of Native and Naturalized Plants*. RI Natural History Survey.

Harris, Marjorie. 2003 *Botanica - North America*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Cullina, William. 2002. *Native Trees, Shrubs and Vines: A Guide to Using, Growing and Propagating North American Woody Plants*. New York, Houghton, Mifflin Company