

### Select Native Shrubs

by Brian O'Connor

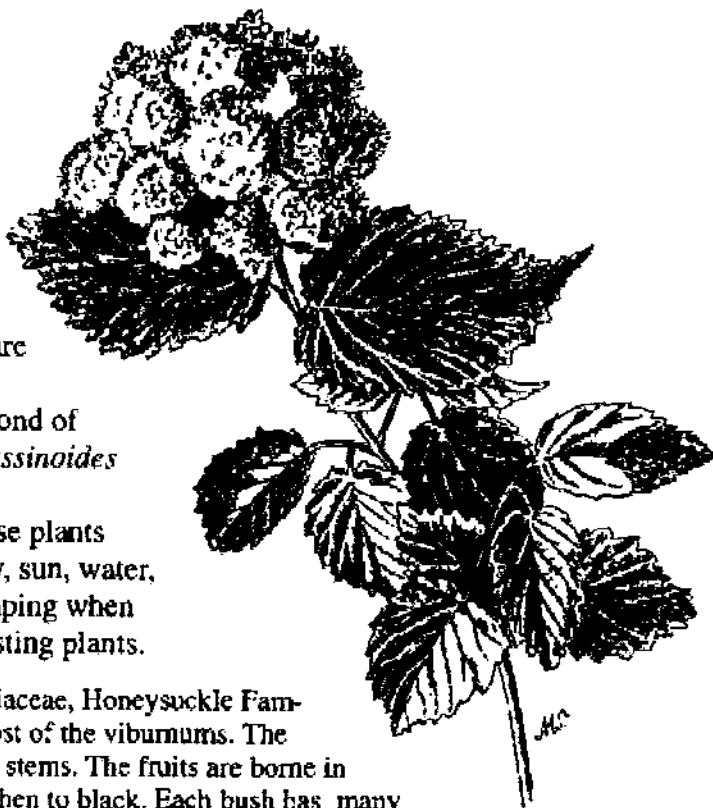
I have always been perplexed by the disparity of availability of native shrubs in the commercial nursery trade. White *Viburnum dentatum* 'Arrowwood,' *Clethra alnifolia* 'Summerspires,' and *Ilex glabra* 'Compactum' are sometimes found. Yet several other native species that I feel are superior are virtually ignored.

Three deciduous shrubs that I am particularly fond of and have attempted to propagate are: *Viburnum cassinoides* (Withe-rod), *Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry), and *Nemopanthus mucronata* (Mountain Holly). These plants excel in domestic settings where increased fertility, sun, water, and space, coupled with judicious pruning and shaping when young, combine to provide very choice and interesting plants.

*Viburnum cassinoides*, or Withe-rod (Family Caprifoliaceae, Honeysuckle Family), sports dark green, elliptical leaves quite unlike most of the viburnums. The flowers are creamy white, produced on cymes on short stems. The fruits are borne in drooping clusters, green at first, changing to pink and then to black. Each bush has many berries of each color as they ripen. Fall foliage begins as purple and changes to orange-red. Terminal buds are prominent in winter and look like hands folded in prayer. This shrub thrives in sun or partial shade.

*Ilex verticillata*, or Winterberry (Family Aquifoliaceae, Holly Family), is a deciduous native holly with shiny, dark green foliage that emerges quite late and turns black soon after the first autumn frosts. Its cream-colored flowers are inconspicuous. This plant's main appeal is its prolific berry crop. The 1/4" bright red berries are breathtaking both before and after the foliage drops. These fruits generally persist for most of the winter, unless they become a feast for a flock of migrating robins or cedar waxwings. This plant does best with plenty of sun. Cultivars of this plant are sometimes available. 'Sparkleberry' is a large-fruited dwarf form. 'Black Beauty' has almost black stems and very dark purple foliage. These plants are radically different from the wild species and, while interesting, certainly not superior.

*Nemopanthus mucronata*, or Mountain Holly (Family Aquifoliaceae, Holly Family), is not easy to find in the southern portion of Rhode Island. I have seen it most frequently in bogs and along the banks of ponds, so one would assume it needs plenty of water. Surprisingly enough, however, the best specimens I have ever located grow on a well drained gravel hillside beneath oaks. Grown in good garden soil in full sun this plant is an absolute knock-out and my personal favorite native. The colors of the emergent delicate foliage and the elongating new stems are a subtle blend of purple and yellow. The holly-like flowers are borne on long stems; the whole plant has a somewhat horizontal branching pattern. The one mature specimen on my property is pruned rather heavily each year to expose mottled gray and white bark on its major stems. The 3/8 to 1/2" fruits are carried singly on long stems, with a smoky reddish hue that is indescribably beautiful and unique. Another good feature is its un-wettable foliage, which causes moisture on the upper leaf surfaces to form beads that sparkle on sunny spring mornings.



## CULTIVATION NOTES

### Propagation: Cuttings and Divisions

As these shrubs are stoloniferous, division is easy but can produce limited numbers of plants. Cuttings, however, are another story. After many attempts over a four-year period, using cutting wood of varying maturity, various media, and different degrees of shading, my experience indicates that propagation with cuttings leads only to utter frustration. While *Viburnum cassinoides* responds to softwood cuttings under mist, it remains very difficult to overwinter. It requires a protected environment over 40° F. As rooting generally occurs in very low percentages, the small number of plants that take root does not justify the expense of heating a greenhouse.

### Propagation: Seeds

The seeds of these plants are doubly dormant: hard coats and immature embryos insure that they will not germinate naturally until the second spring. Warm and cold stratification, however, can artificially hasten the breakdown of the seedcoat and the maturation of the embryos, effectively eliminating one year of waiting and allowing seeds to germinate the first spring following collection.

Always begin with a superabundance of seeds. Collect the berries in late October and soak them in water for a few days to help separate the seeds from the pulp. When clean, place the seeds into labeled pots in sand or sterile potting mix and place the trays near the kitchen sink to facilitate keeping the media moist. After three months the warm stratification is complete. Now empty the contents—seeds, media, and label—into zip-lock sandwich bags and place in the refrigerator. Remove the seeds in early June and plant in flats, cold frames, or seed beds. I prefer flats because once I have transplanted the number of seedlings I desire for the year, the flat can be placed in a coldframe and heavily covered with pine boughs to exclude light but permit water to penetrate.

### Growing On

I have found that most tree and shrub seedlings, both native and otherwise, seem to be surprisingly more susceptible to damping-off fungi than are vegetable or perennial seedlings. The somewhat late starting date given earlier (June) ensures rapid germination and growth while avoiding those cold and soggy spring conditions that favor fungal attacks. Seedlings started even this late will, by late summer, surpass in both size and vitality cuttings of the same species rooted in early spring. Seedlings are generally much easier to overwinter as well, requiring the limited protection of a cold frame or a layer of mulch in a protected setting.

The propagation of any plant, wild or domestic, is made up of 5% science, 5% luck, and 90% magic. If you attempt to propagate these or any of the many other underutilized natives, remember that as wildlings they have no human-manipulated genetic improvements to insure uniform germination. Given the vagaries and countless variables in the natural world, you should expect the unexpected and remember to honor your failures as your best teachers. Seeds that don't germinate the first year will generally sprout the following spring. I'm sure your endeavors in this realm will prove to be very rewarding.