

Alternate-leaved Dogwood

Family: Cornales

Swida alternifolia (syn. *Cornus alternifolia*)

by Garry Plunkett

The alternate-leaved dogwood is a common shrub found throughout eastern forests. This may surprise some readers, because its presence is anything but flamboyant, and thus is often overlooked. To illustrate, a few years ago I was helping a friend establish native plants in her small woodland and planted two of them, only to discover afterwards that a lovely mature one was already on the property. So you will need to look carefully to find them, usually in shady nooks or woodland edges where they are always pleasing to see and beneficial to the ecosystem. For one's woodland garden there may be no other native shrub with so many favorable attributes. It has graceful form, exquisitely figured leaves, commendable flowers, and beautiful fruit that wild birds love. What else can one plant do?



A signature feature of this dogwood is its posture – the graceful form it tends to assume. This includes a dominant vertical leader fitted with lateral branching that is gathered in distinct tiers going up the stem. The side branches extend almost horizontal to the ground, then bend gently upward, like the pose of a ballet dancer. This tiered architecture has led to another common name for the shrub, pagoda dogwood.

The shrub's foliage also has a pleasant symmetry, with boughs that are never overcrowded nor unbalanced, as if arranged to provide each leaf with an appointed place in the sunlight. Venation in the leaves has the characteristic dogwood pattern, veins departing the midrib then curving upward to eventually run parallel against the leaf margin. That "fingerprint" is accentuated during Spring and Fall when the leaves are changing color – from light to darker green in the Spring, and from green to deep red in the Fall. The leaf tissue adjacent to the veins changes color at a different rate than the rest of the leaf, which for a brief time creates a two-toned leaf that is quite lovely.

The flowers are similar to the other shrub dogwoods, the familiar clusters of small, creamy white florets. But, they do seem a bit more reliable in producing attractive displays, even in limited sunlight. While it is unusual to see gray and silky dogwoods with lots of flowers, it is not unusual to see that on the alternate-leaved. The flowers also produce fruit that is some of the prettiest in the forest. The pea-sized berries ripen to a deep, inky blue which contrasts vividly with the bright red color of the pedicels (the individual flower stems in an inflorescence). Find a ripe fruit cluster with a backdrop of green foliage and you will have a nice photo-op. But do not delay if you want a picture because birds also seek them out. In return for a meal the birds provide a free planting service that eventually results in seedlings that the landowner can transplant or give away.

In addition to its admirable aesthetic qualities the alternate-leaved dogwood is a model of good behavior. Its growth rate is perfect – fast enough to have a sizeable shrub within two to three years of planting, then later slow enough to not outgrow its appointed space too quickly. It needs little attention as it matures, eventually to the size of a small tree. It will not sprout suckers and it rarely produces dead limbs, so almost no pruning is needed. Even better, this dogwood has shown resistance to the anthracnose fungus that has been infecting New England flowering dogwoods (*Benthamidia florida*, syn. *Cornus florida*).

Some readers by now have surely concluded that the alternate-leaved dogwood is one of those undiscovered native shrubs that they should find a place for. If so, they are not difficult to “discover” because they are commonly available at nursery outlets that feature native stock. They are also offered at the annual RIWPS native plant sales. For those who have a friend with a mature specimen, a careful examination of the surrounding area will probably reveal a seedling, or even a sapling, either of which would transplant easily.

So, if there is a long neglected shady corner of your garden, look no further. There is surely a little alternate-leaved dogwood out there somewhere that would love to be adopted. It will please both you and your neighborhood birds, and it will prove to be an undemanding guest.

RIWPS Policy

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: “*Cultivation Note*” is a regular feature in *WildfloraRI*, the *Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society*. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at Richard.Fisher2@cox.net. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — WildfloraRI Editorial Committee.

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