

Viburnums: Native Shrubs For the Home Landscape

***Viburnum dentatum*, Arrowwood, *V. acerifolium*, Maple-leaved Viburnum, *Viburnum lentago*, Nannyberry, *V. nudum*, Witherod**

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Family: **Caprifoliaceae**

As we watch many of our woodlands decimated by new construction, it becomes vital to try and make our home landscapes as much a wildlife and native plant sanctuary as possible. Viburnums make an excellent addition to any landscape aimed at creating such a sanctuary. They are an important but often overlooked members of our native plant community. Their fruit has a high food value for a wide variety of birds and some mammals. The blossoms are nectar sources for bees and butterflies. The Maple-leaved species is a the larval host for the spring azure butterfly and some moths. With their lovely flowers, persistent and colorful fruits, bright fall foliage and hardy nature, Viburnums also contribute to the beauty of any garden.

Viburnums thrive in a variety of habitats. These lovely spring flowering shrubs can be found under a canopy of trees, in meadows, along roadsides, or in salt and freshwater wetlands. No matter what conditions exist in your landscape there is a suitable Viburnum for them.



Maple-leaved Viburnum

Habitat and Identifying Characteristics

Viburnum acerifolium Maple-leaved Viburnum

V. acerifolium is very tolerant of dry shade, making it an excellent understory tree for woodland areas. This plant does well in shade or full sunlight. It tends to be smaller than its relatives, rarely growing larger than four or five feet, making it suitable for the average home.

Identifying Characteristics: The shape of the leaf gives it the common name of maple-leaf. It holds its flowers and berries upright on a stalk.

Viburnum nudum Witherod

V. nudum prefers moist, shady locations, but will grow well in full sun. It is tolerant of salt conditions, making it useful for coastal sites. This Viburnum stays dense and compact and has arching branches, possibly reaching a mature height of six feet. It is easily pruned and grows at a moderate rate. The foliage and compact size make it adaptable for the smaller garden. Its fruit is edible but taste is variable.

Identifying Characteristics: Long, thin buds, leaves simple with little serration.

Viburnum dentatum Northern Arrowwood

V. dentatum grows in sun or partial shade, but does best in moist soil. It is found commonly along streams and ponds. If a barrier planting is desired, these plants work well. Their upright stems form a dense barrier. In nature it can grow into a large thicket or remain as single specimen depending on soil conditions. *V. dentatum* is also very tolerant of urban pollutants. The fall foliage can be the most spectacular of the Viburnums. Its common name reflects that Native Americans used of the strong young shoots as shafts for arrows.

Identifying Characteristics: Leaves heart-shaped or oval and deeply serrated.

Viburnum lentago Nannyberry, Sheepberry

V. lentago is one of the largest Viburnums and really suitable only if you have enough space. When grown in full sunlight it can become a small tree. It prefers a richer soil than other Viburnums. This plant works well as part of a hedgerow or in shrub borders.

Identifying Characteristics: Leaves simple, finely toothed.

Plant Descriptions

Viburnum acerifolium Maple-leaved Viburnum

A sparsely branched shrub growing 4-6 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Leaves are opposite, simple, usually 3-lobed, similar to Maple leaves. They are round to cordate at base. Foliage is bright to dark green in summer and changes to reddish purple in fall. Flowers are flat-topped, terminal cymes, yellowish white, and all fertile. They appear in early to mid-summer and are 1 to 3 inches in diameter. They are held upright on long stalks. The fruit starts as red, ellipsoidal, drupes, which ripen to black by September. They may persist into winter.

Viburnum nudum Witherrod

A dense shrub, compact and rounded, that grows 5-6 feet tall with equal spread. Slightly arching branches. Leaves are opposite, simple, lance-shaped, 1 ½ to 3 ½ inches long to ¾ to 2 ¼ inches wide. Margins are smooth or finely toothed.

Dull, dark green foliage changes to orange-red, crimson and purple in the fall. Young leaves may have bronze or purple tint. The 2-5 inch diameter flowers are flat-topped, cymes, creamy white, appearing in June to early July. The fruit changes from green to pink then from red to blue before becoming black in September. Often all colors are present in the same cluster.



Nannyberry or Sheepberry

Viburnum dentatum Northern Arrowwood

A multi-stemmed dense, rounded shrub, 6-8 foot height with 6-15 foot spread. Leaves are opposite, simple, ovate, coarsely toothed, 2-4 inches long, 1 to 4 inches wide. The foliage is dark green and at times the leaves have a shiny appearance. Fall color yellow, glossy red to reddish purple. Flowers are flat-topped white cymes appearing in June. The fruit is a striking blue or black.

Viburnum lentago, Nannyberry, Sheepberry

Can be a large shrub or a small tree, 15 to 18 feet in height, but may reach up to 30 feet. Leaves are opposite, simple, elliptic, and finely toothed. Autumn color is purplish red. Flowers are small, white, flat-topped terminal cymes which are slightly fragrant, 2-5 inches across. Fruits are blue-black drupes and edible.

Propagation

All these species of Viburnums are easily reproduced from softwood cuttings or by layering. Softwood and semi-hardwood cuttings taken in June and July and treated with an appropriate rooting compound such as IBA (indolebutyric acid) are very successful. Layering is best done in the spring. Bend young, flexible stems onto the ground. Nick the underside of the stem. Press the nick gently into the soil. Cover with mulch or flat stone. Rooting should occur within six to eight weeks. The rooted area can be left in ground until following spring. To transplant cut off the newly rooted area leaving approximately one foot of old stem still attached. Transplant whole section to pot or nursery area. Allow the plant to mature for the entire summer and then transplant to final location.

Seed propagation is a long process taking 3 months to a year, depending on species for germination. Alternating cold and warm periods are needed. See Durr for further information.

Through all four seasons and with little care Viburnums can add much to your landscape; Spring flowers, Winter fruit, vivid Fall foliage, and Summer scent. They provide food and shelter for wildlife, survive harsh conditions and contribute to the character of any garden. What more could you ask from a plant? But a special bonus is that they give you a lovely and easy way to support the survival of a native plant species.

References

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