

# VIBURNUMS

*A review/essay by Bob Deming*

We depend upon Michael A. Dirr to give us complete information on trees and shrubs. So, Dirr's 2007 volume Viburnums: Flowering Shrubs for Every Season impresses as much as his earlier Manual of Woody Landscape Plants (1998 revised edition), or his Hardy Trees and Shrubs (1997) or his more recent Hydrangeas for American Gardens (2004).

Viburnums is not like Dirr's Manual, which is "researched, detailed, and perhaps too intense for everyday gardeners" (p. 9). This book is in paragraph form rather than template form. He presents habit, foliage, flower, fruit, culture and uses

There are several short chapters—on history, nomenclature and taxonomy (Ch. 1), breeding (Ch. 3), planting, pruning, fertilization, and landscape uses (Ch. 4), diseases, insects, and pests (Ch. 5), and propagation (Ch. 6). The "heart" of the book, though, is the 183 page Chapter Two list of 79 "Species and Cultivars" with beautiful illustrations by Bonnie L. Dirr. There are plenty of photos as well, documenting size, leaves, fruit, and fall color.

Interestingly enough, Dirr says (p. 18) there are no common characteristics that can be applied across all species of viburnum except that "1. the fruit is a drupe, generally ellipsoidal, flattened, ovoid to rounded, with a fleshy coat, hard bony endocarp, and a single seed within; and the leaves are always arranged opposite; a few species, occasionally, have three leaves at a node."

To further demonstrate how varied, even contradictory, morphological characteristics of viburnums are, consider this list of flowers (p. 14): "white (most), pink, all fertile, fertile and sterile, all sterile and showy, fragrant, foul, or no discernible odor." As to the exact number of viburnum species, Dirr refers to Lloyd Kenyon [2001. Viburnums. NCCPG Stable Courtyard, Wisley, Woking, Surrey, England] who notes 250 species—20 from North America, 60 from Central and South American; 4 from Europe; 30 from North Africa; the other half are from Asia.

For the serious horticulturist, there are discussions of how the specific determinations about viburnum species are now dependent upon the use of DNA rather than taxonomies based on floral and fruit (i.e., reproductive) characteristics. There is an Appendix dealing with "Seed, Cutting, and Grafting Propagation Techniques" (pp. 235-248). And there is a very technical section on "viburnum breeding protocols" (pp. 205-208).

Other than chapter two's detailed information on the 79 specific viburnum species and cultivars, the "landscape uses" section of Chapter Four is probably of most interest to the general gardener. Viburnums, Dirr notes are "remarkably adaptable" requiring well-drained, slightly acidic, moist soils. There are species that grow in wet soils, or on chalk. There are plants that are more open since they grow in the shade; other plants are more "restrained" when grown in the sun. Viburnums are best transplanted from containers or balled and burlapped when they are dormant, in either spring or fall, planted slightly above the surface. Almost all flower on previous year's wood. They usually do not require heavy-handed pruning. Prune after flowering. [See the "Tips on Pruning Viburnums" elsewhere in this Newsletter]. Their use in the landscape runs the gamut of applications: specimen plants, large groupings and massings, certain species make great hedging and screening plants. Their berries are beneficial to wild life.

While viburnums vary in size from two to 30 feet, they also vary in growth habits, foliage, fruit, and winter appearance. Small forms (like *Viburnum carlesii* ‘Compacta’ and *V. opulus* ‘Compactum’) work well planted close to houses. Larger forms like *V. lantana* and *V. prunifolium* function as both specimen and screen planting. The primarily white blossoms range from snowball shape to flat forms; the clustered florets are usually sterile, but some have both sterile and fertile florets. There are red and blue, even blue-black fruit. Foliage varies from types with a velvety smooth leaf surface those with a bold, rough-veined texture and glossy leathery character. Many forms have attractive fall color. Viburnums are hardy, resistant to serious pests (except the viburnum beetle), adaptable to various soils, and require little pruning. Though they will grow in sun or shade, flowering and fruiting will be more “profuse” in sun.

Of special interest to Delaware gardeners are the descriptions of the seven native Delaware species of viburnum (all of which are described, of course, in much greater scientific detail in his Manual):

*Viburnum acerifolium* (Mapleleaf Viburnum) “dwells on the forest floor. . . and will never ascend to the garden acceptance of *V. carlesii* and *V. dentatum*” (p,18). It is, however useful in “naturalized landscapes” tolerating full sun to partial shade and dry shade, and grows to only 4-6.’ It was introduced in 1736.

*Viburnum cassinoides* has many common names: Witherod Viburnum, Swamp Viburnum, Appalachian Tea Viburnum, Swamp Blackhaw, False Paraguay Tea, and Wild Raisin. A native, suckering shrub, it usually reaches 10’ by 10’ or taller in the wild. Plants grown in full sun flower profusely with yellow-stemmed white flowers. And, it grows “from granite mountaintops to the edges of streams in moist, acid soil in full sun and shade” (p. 55). Introduced 1761.

*Viburnum dentatum* (Arrowwood Viburnum) is “one of the most durable viburnums for general landscape use” (p. 63); it is impervious to extremes of climate and soils. It grows 6-8’ with a dense, multi-stemmed habit, not very “flagrant” color in the Fall and makes a good hedge or screen.

In his Manual (pp. 1065-6), Dirr lists *Viburnum rafinesquianum* as a closely related species to *V. dentatum* which he calls “polymorphic.” In his Viburnums book, he lists *V. rafinesquianum* separately as the Raninesque Viburnum, or the Down Arrowwood Viburnum. He still labels it an eastern United States native

*Viburnum lentago* (Nannyberry Viburnum) is a woodland or woodland edge species; it is tall and leggy; it grows about 12’ high and wide. It was introduced in 1761, and is seldom grown in Zone 7.

*Viburnum nudum* (‘Winterthur’ Viburnum) is still “underutilized” in gardens in spite of the popularity of such cultivars as ‘Winterthur,’ ‘Earth Shade,’ ‘Count Pulaski,’ and ‘Pink Beauty’—apparently only the first two are commercially available. It does best at the edge of the woods, but its colors are more vivid in full sun. Great variety of size, from compact to leggy and open with sparse foliage.

*Viburnum prunifolium* (Blackhaw Viburnum) grows in sun or shade, tolerates dry soil, grows 12’ to 18’ and sometimes exists as a small tree.

*Viburnum rufidulum* (Rusty Blackhaw Viburnum) is another shrub that tolerates heavy shade but has maximum flowering and fruiting in full sun. It is also adaptable to dry soils. It has white flowers and pink-to blue-to black fruit. Enormous in the wild at 30’ to 40’, it usually grows 20’ to 20’ in cultivation.

*Viburnum trilobum* (American Cranberry-bush Viburnum) or as new nomenclature lists it, *V.opulus.var.americanum* Ait) forms a 10' high and wide, rounded, multi-stem shrub. Its habits are very similar to the European Cranberry-bush Viburnum. Has superior fall color and resistance to aphids. Use as hedge, screen, or to define property boundaries.

*V. alnifolium* (Hobblebush) is under new nomenclature known as *V. lantanoides*. It develops a “procumbent habit” when its outer branches touch the ground, but it grows 9' to 12' in height. It lacks symmetry according to Dirr (p. 111).

While of great interest to those of us committed to planting native shrubs rather than exotic shrubs, only a few Delaware natives can compare favorably with the more well known, varieties of viburnum: *V. burkwoodii*, *V. carleisi*, *V. juddi*, *V. opulus* or *V. plicatum*. There are, however, viburnums aplenty for all of our needs and desires.

In general, Dirr notes, “viburnums are not flashy, gaudy, knock-your-socks-off plants like hydrangeas. They comport themselves with understated dignity. . . .” (p. 10). And, the final word is his: “A garden without a viburnum is akin to life without music and art” [ Manual, p.1055 ]

[additional source: Ohio State University Fact Sheet HYG-1062-88 “Viburnums in the Landscape.”]

