



# Dogwoods: A Plant for Every Yard

Story and Photos by Bill Johnson

I have to admit that when I'm out looking for flowering shrubs and trees to photograph, some of my favorites are in the dogwood family. In spring, many varieties have spectacular flowers and in the fall many have very decorative seed pods.

Even in winter, several varieties are known for their colorful bark, which at that time of year can be a nice visual break from the stark, snow-covered landscape.

The dogwood genus *Cornus* includes many different native species spread throughout several USDA Zones. The shrubs do well in full sun to part shade. Many are quite tolerant of wetter areas in the landscape.

The trees prefer an understory location, protected by the canopy of large trees. The trees also do well with an eastern exposure in most gardens. Flowering dogwood trees are shallowly rooted and tend to suffer more in drought, so these may need supplemental water in hot, dry summers. Flowering dogwoods tend to be slightly more broad than tall.

## DOGWOOD GROUND COVER

The smallest dogwood is the bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*), a

**Yellow-green variegated foliage and large pink and white flowers make Cherokee Sunset™ flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida* 'Sunset') a glorious ornamental tree in the landscape.**



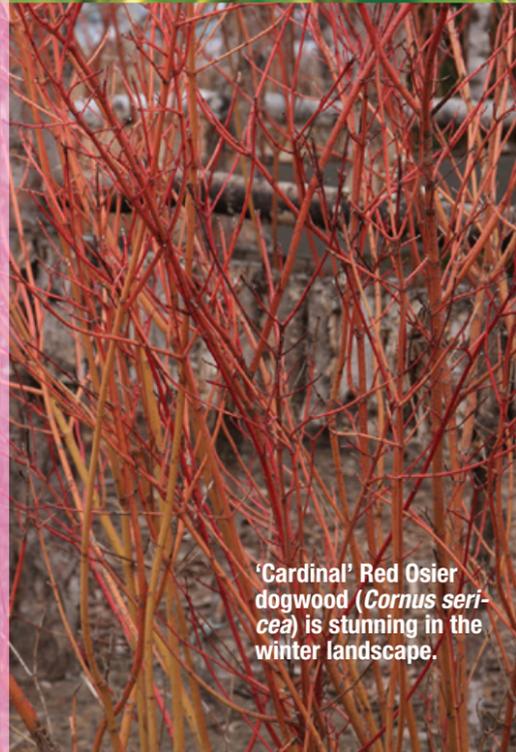
Like a lot of dogwoods, the native pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*) has spectacular fall foliage.



The flowers of bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*) are followed by red berries, making this an attractive, multiseason ground cover in colder climates.



'Flaviramea' yellow-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) may reach 8 feet tall and wide.



'Cardinal' Red Osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) is stunning in the winter landscape.

perennial woodland inhabitant that clings to the ground. In spring, it has small green flowers surrounded by four-pointed white petals set against a larger group of pointed green leaves. In fall, this plant can be easily spotted by its clusters of bright red berries. It gets about 6 inches tall with a spread of 2 feet. It prefers an acidic, moist, well-drained soil, in northern climates. It struggles in hot summers and in soil that gets warmer than about 65 F.

#### DOGWOOD SHRUBS

A medium-sized shrub that can be found in many gardens is *Cornus sericea* (syn. *C. stolonifera*), commonly referred to as red osier dogwood. Several ornamental cultivars of the native dogwood are available: 'Cardinal', 'Hedgerows Gold', 'Isanti' and Arctic Fire™ (*C. S.* 'Farrow'). 'Flaviramea' is a hardy, popular Yellow Twig dogwood. A few have multiple attractive features, such as 'Silver and Gold', which has variegated leaves.

The main attraction for most of these is the color of stems rather than the flowers or foliage. They range from bright red to green to yellow. The size of yellow- and red-twig dogwoods depends on the cultivar. Arctic Fire™ is about 3 feet tall and wide whereas 'Flaviramea' may get 8 feet tall and wide.

The gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*) is another shrubby dogwood that can be found in wild, woodland habitats from Zones 4 to 8. Also known as the northern swamp dogwood, this native shrub can get to 10 to 15 feet tall and wide. White blooms grace the plant early to mid-June, eventually yielding white berries that birds love. Ornamental cultivars to consider: 'Emerald', marketed as Snow Lace® Gray Dogwood, and a variegated variety, 'Variegata'.

#### DOGWOOD TREES

Pagoda dogwood, (*Cornus alternifolia*), frequently found in woodland habitats, is a small tree, reaching 20 to 25 feet tall and up to 30 feet wide. This native tree is a welcome addition to the landscape, too, when space allows. It has white, lace-cap flowers that yield blue or black berries as the season progresses, providing food for birds.

## Dogwoods & Growing Zones

- *Cornus alba*, red-bark dogwood, Zones 3-7
- *Cornus alternifolia*, pagoda dogwood, Zones 3-8
- *Cornus canadensis*, bunchberry, Zones 2-8
- *Cornus florida*, flowering dogwood, Zones 5-9
- *Cornus kousa*, Japanese flowering dogwood, Zones 5-8
- *Cornus mas*, Cornelian cherry dogwood, Zones 4-8
- *Cornus pumila*, dwarf dogwood, Zones 4-7
- *Cornus racemosa*, gray dogwood, Zones 4-8
- *Cornus sanguinea*, bloodtwig dogwood, Zones 4-7
- *Cornus stolonifera* (syn. *Cornus sericea*), redtwig and yellowtwig dogwood, Zones 2-10

Pagoda dogwood cultivars to consider: Gold Bullion™ (*C. alternifolia* 'Bachone') and Golden Shadows™ (*C. A.* 'W. Stackman'), which have yellow and green leaves. 'Argentea' has green and white variegated leaves, and Pinky Spot™ (*C. A.* 'Min pinky') has pink and white on green leaves. As a photographer, the most striking features are the red hues in fall. On an overcast day, it's hard to get a bad photo of a multi-colored leaf cluster.

*Cornus florida*, most commonly referred to as flowering dogwood or eastern dogwood, is a native species that grows in Zones 5 to 9, mostly in the eastern half of the country. However, many cultivars are making their way into northern Zone 5 gardens, here in the middle of the country.

Flowering dogwoods grow to 20 feet tall and wide, or more. Space should be a definite consideration when selecting one of these for the garden. *Cornus florida* is not that common in the upper Midwest, but



The yellow flowers on Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*) bloom in late winter or very early spring. The fruit is edible.

## My Choice



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'Wolf Eyes' kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) gets about 20 feet tall and wide. It has variegated foliage and white pointed bracts or petals.



'Midwinter Fire' bloodtwig dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) gets 5 to 6 feet tall and wide. It has showy, fragrant flowers.

# DOGWOODS



'Wolf Eyes' kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) berries.

has been successfully grown in the mid to southern portions of Iowa and Michigan. If you are able to grow this species, it has many beautiful cultivars, such as 'Cloud Nine', 'First Lady', 'Purple Glory', 'Pumpkin Patch' (which I've photographed in Iowa), the Cherokee series including 'Cherokee Princess', Cherokee Brave™ (*Cornus florida* 'Comco No. 1') and Cherokee Sunset™ (*C. F.* 'Sunset'), among others.

Another striking ornamental dogwood is the kousa dogwood, (*Cornus kousa*), also known as the Chinese or the Japanese flowering dogwood. This mid size tree, 20 to 25 feet tall, can be grown in Zones 5 to 8. Kousas bloom a bit later than the native flowering dogwood. It also appears to be resistant to some of the leaf problems that sometimes afflict the native species.

The spring-blooming flowers of

many cultivars are quite colorful, including 'Gold Star', 'Lemon Ripple', 'Milky Way', 'Rosabella' (syn. 'Satomi'), 'Moonbeam' and my favorites, the variegated cultivars 'Variegata', 'Snowboy' and the amazing 'Wolf Eyes'. The spring flowers aren't the only striking part of the plant.

Throughout late summer into fall, copious red acorn to strawberry-sized fruits form, becoming a display to appreciate. Oddly enough, the berries are edible, but not to everyone's taste; they are more appreciated by birds.

The Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*) has flowers unlike most of the other *Cornus* species. The flowers form from late winter to early spring in small yellow clusters on leafless twigs and branches. The red fruit ripens in late summer through early fall, and are another favorite food source of birds. This plant gets 15 to 25 feet tall and wide. A couple of ornamental varieties

to consider are 'Golden Glory' and 'Variegata', which has green and white leaves.

As you can see, the dogwood family is quite varied, from a low-growing ground cover to shrubs to medium size trees. Make sure to plan for the mature size of the plant you select.

The real beauty of dogwoods is the seasonal show, from amazing floral displays in springtime and colorful collections of fruits in late summer to fall color and winter beauty. If you have the space, these can be an addition to your yard that you and your birds will love. ♡

*Bill Johnson is a freelance photographer and writer in Minnesota. His latest book, Minnesota Bug Hunt, with author Bruce Giebink, will be published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press in April. You can see more of his work at [billjohnsonbeyondbutterflies.com](http://billjohnsonbeyondbutterflies.com)*