

## VIBURNUMS: SHRUBS OF DISTINCTION

by Fred Spicer

To the savvy gardener, viburnums are a well-known and diverse group of flowering shrubs offering multiple seasons of ornamental interest with their flower, fruit and foliage displays. Nevertheless, they are sometimes misunderstood and avoided by many beginners. The problem is twofold. First, in a three-gallon nursery container, viburnums can look more open and asymmetrical than other, perhaps more familiar plants. Viburnums do not make cute garden center “miniatures” like spiraea and euonymus do. But after several seasons in the garden (or nursery field) their attractive growth habits are revealed nicely. Second, poorly-informed consumers purchase viburnums without being aware of their preferred size. The result is that they are planted in tight spaces and sheared mercilessly, like yew or holly. This muddles their naturally graceful shape and interferes with or eliminates flower bud and fruit production. The potentially-converted viburnum owner is frustrated by an seemingly unkempt shrub which flowers and fruits poorly, if at all.

Thankfully, viburnum success is easy to achieve. Like so many other mistreated deciduous shrubs, viburnums want a bit of room in the garden, room in which to grow unhindered by the shears. They will be much more attractive and happier this way and so will you. It is good advice to observe mature examples of the selections you desire prior to planting them out as some selections can get quite large. The common doublefile viburnum (*Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum*) can easily exceed fifteen feet in width and ten feet in height. The deliciously fragrant Burkwood viburnum (*Viburnum x burkwoodii*) quickly reaches a height of twelve feet and a spread of eight feet. Both of these plants are splendid if you’ve got the room...troublesome if you don’t. Even newer, compact or “dwarf” selections are only smaller relative to the size of the species. There are, of course, exceptions such as the slow-growing dwarf European cranberry-bush (*Viburnum opulus* ‘Nanum’) which takes many years to reach a scant four feet in width.

Pruning of viburnums should be done with a light hand and is of two types. The first type would eliminate severely rubbing branches and dead wood; it can be done at any time. The second type is performed immediately after flowering (to minimize flower loss) and the cuts are made at the very bottom of the plant, removing the oldest canes at ground level. This renewal pruning encourages the emergence of new stems from the base of the plant which will be more vigorous and floriferous than those removed. It also will effectively control the plant’s size if done on a regular basis. Some experts recommend removal of as much as a third of the stems each year. In my opinion, this is a drastic measure useful for renovating an overmature, misshapen plant but an excessive procedure otherwise. Don’t shear them as viburnums do not take kindly to this treatment. The ensuing growth will be unattractive and the plant’s shape difficult to restore. Tree form viburnums, like the Sargent viburnum (*Viburnum sargentii*), would not require this latter treatment.

Rhododendron fanciers - keen to develop an interest in another plant group - are often dismayed to find out that viburnums offer restricted flower color choices. White (or cream) is basically the rule although the flowers of some selections pass through a bud stage featuring pink, or red in the case of the exquisite hybrid Mohawk viburnum (*Viburnum x burkwoodii* 'Mohawk'). But white is an extremely useful color in the garden, being invaluable for blending other colors together or for cooling down compositions which are too hot. Viburnums excel in the mixed border, combining well with herbaceous plants and adding characteristics rhododendrons simply cannot compete with: fragrance, fall color and fruit display. Not all are fragrant but those which are, are among the best available shrubs for this feature. A particular favorite is the Judd viburnum (*Viburnum x juddii*) whose pink-tinted flowers emit a strong scent favoring cloves and cinnamon. The fragrant viburnum (*Viburnum farreri*) is an aptly-named plant with a encouraging propensity to open its blossoms sporadically during warm spells throughout winter.

Viburnums, as a genus, are relatively free of major insect and disease problems. Their foliage is little troubled by pests with the exception of an occasional touch of non-fatal powdery mildew; the stems may suffer aphid attack. Foliage in season is typically green, often lustrous, sometimes heavily-textured. The Willowwood viburnum (*Viburnum x rhytidophylloides* 'Willowwood'), a hybrid developed by Henry Tubbs at the Willowwood Arboretum, has large, very coarse-textured leaves which can remain evergreen and attractive through winter. Fall color on truly deciduous viburnums can be quite exceptional, especially on those hybrids and cultivars which have been selected for this trait. The Winterthur smooth witheredod (*Viburnum nudum* 'Winterthur') has outstanding deep red-purple, long-lasting fall color on its highly glossy leaves.

Viburnums form a large genus of species, cultivars and hybrids and they enjoy each other's company immensely. It is only in the presence of several relatives - the nearer the better, the more the merrier - that their fruiting potential is realized. At its best, this late summer and fall (rarely into winter) display is without equal. Fruit colors of yellow, orange, red, pink, blue and black are possible. Our native blackhaw viburnum (*Viburnum prunifolium*) has fruit which progresses from white to pink to rose to blue and finally to black. But plant variety and quantity are essential components for the cross-pollination to fully work its magic. Another factor is the presence, or rather the absence, of migratory songbirds, who eagerly strip the high-energy food on their way south. On the other hand, you might be content to allow the birds their repast, enjoy their visit and observe the fruit display, however fleeting, while you can.

In his popular book, Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, Michael Dirr says of viburnums, "A garden without a viburnum is akin to life without music and art." I can think of no finer tribute to this fine genus. Whether you're planting only one, or an entire collection, these first-rate performers will return countless garden pleasures. These viburnums and other choice selections will be available at the fall symposium.