

Virginia's Favorite Tree

By Susan Camp

Considered by many people to be the loveliest of the spring-flowering trees, American or flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), is the state tree and flower of Virginia. *Cornus florida* is native to eastern and south-central North America and northeastern Mexico. *C. florida* grows naturally in dappled shade beneath larger trees in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 through 9, but it will tolerate morning sun with afternoon shade and sufficient irrigation.

American dogwood is a flat-topped tree with horizontal upper and drooping lower branches. The oval, dark green leaves are 3 to 6 inches long and silvery-green on the underside. In autumn, the leaves turn striking shades of red and burgundy.

The lovely white "blossoms" that greet us every spring are modified leaves called bracts. Bract color ranges from greenish-white to pink to red, depending on the cultivar. Four bracts surround the true flower, a tight cluster of yellowish-green buttons. Butterflies sip the nectar, and several species of mining *Andrena* bees gather the pollen for their larvae to eat.

Bright red drupes develop in the fall, attracting songbirds, wild turkeys, squirrels, foxes, and other small mammals. The drupes are reported to be bitter and possibly toxic to humans.

At 15 to 30 feet tall at maturity with a similar spread, flowering dogwood would be a perfect specimen or understory tree, except that it has several serious insect pest and disease problems. It is vulnerable to dogwood borers, leaf miners, and scale insects. Diseases include canker leaf spot, powdery mildew, root rot, leaf and twig blight, and spot anthracnose.

The most serious disease is dogwood anthracnose (*Discula destructiva*), an exotic fungal infection that was discovered in the United States in 1978. As many as 50% of native flowering dogwoods in the eastern U.S. have died from *Discula* since it first was diagnosed. The current recommendation to prevent *Discula* infection is to plant *C. florida* in full sun, which is contrary to traditional planting instructions. If the tree is well-irrigated during drought conditions, it may survive full sun. Dogwood anthracnose is more commonly seen at higher elevations.

Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*), an Asian species, is reported to have higher resistance to anthracnose and better cold hardiness. It is sometimes planted instead of *C. florida*. Both *C. florida* and *C. kousa* tolerate deer, which will munch on the tender stems and leaves.

There is good news for those who want to plant native dogwoods. A wild dogwood discovered at Camp David in Catoctin State Park, Maryland was found to be dogwood anthracnose resistant. Developed by the University of Tennessee Dogwood breeding program and named 'Appalachian Spring,' it has apple-green leaves and large red fruits with red to purple fall foliage.

Flowering dogwood requires moist, deep, well-drained, acidic soil that is rich in organic material. Whether planted in sun or shade, it is not drought tolerant and must be watered during dry periods, especially during the first few years after planting. The tree should be mulched, but the mulch must be kept away from the trunk to help prevent disease and insect infestation.

Lawnmower cuts and weed-eater damage to the bark stress the tree, making it vulnerable to disease and insects. *C. florida* tolerates deer, black walnut trees, and clay soil.

Flowering dogwood does not transplant easily, so purchase only healthy trees from reputable garden centers. As with all native plants, it is best to let a flowering dogwood remain where it is growing. Don't attempt to dig one up to transplant to your yard. It likely will die.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publications 3010-1484 "Flowering Dogwood: *Cornus florida*" and 426-611 "Selecting Landscape Plants: Flowering Trees" and Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entries "*Cornus florida*" and "*Cornus florida* 'Appalachian Spring'" offer information on planting and caring for dogwoods, not always easy tasks.

American dogwood requires tender loving care and frequent observation for problems, but the beauty of this fussy prima donna in bloom makes the extra work worth the effort.