

# Native Viburnums

For three-season interest from flowers, berries, and fall foliage, few shrubs can match our native viburnums.

BY C. COLSTON BURRELL



“A GARDEN WITHOUT a viburnum is akin to life without music and art,” declares University of Georgia horticulturist Michael Dirr in his *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*. I heartily agree, and so do gardeners everywhere. My first garden was planted in a mature woodland, where a canopy of tulip poplar and oaks towered over thickets of native viburnums. Mapleleaf viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*) and blackhaw (*V. prunifolium*) were some of the first shrubs I learned to identify and grow, and they are still favorites. (For details on selected native species, see pages 50 and 51.)

Viburnums are among the most popular shrubs because they delight us with flowers, fruit, and flamboyant autumn foliage. Of the 150 or so species in the genus, about 15 are native to North America. While showy Asian species and hybrids sporting fragrant spring flowers—such as Korean spicebush (*V. carlesii*)—have received the lion’s share of attention, the American natives excel in three and even four seasons, stealing their way into gardeners’ hearts with their subtle beauty and grace. As a wildlife gardener, I also love our native viburnums because they provide food and critical nesting cover to a host of birds and other wildlife.

A member of the honeysuckle family (Caprifoliaceae), this genus of mostly deciduous shrubs to small trees is distributed in northern temperate regions worldwide. Viburnums are characterized by small, five-petaled flowers clustered in flat to gently mounded flowerheads that botanists term cymes. I am particularly enamored of species, such as hobblebush

Mapleleaf viburnum, here in autumn color, looks much like its namesake.

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(*V. lantanoides*), that sport an outer ring of large, showy sterile flowers to produce an effect similar to that of a lace-cap hydrangea.

Viburnum leaves are borne in pairs on the supple stems. These may be simple or lobed and often have toothed edges. The vegetative (leaf) buds bear a pair of scales like a duck's bill, while flower buds are larger and globular to teardrop shaped.

The colorful fruits of viburnums ripen in late summer and autumn. Each fruit, technically a drupe, bears a single large seed surrounded by fleshy pulp. The fruits of many American viburnums have been gathered for food, giving rise to colloquial names such as haw, wild raisin, and cranberry. Many people consider American cranberrybush (*V. opulus* var. *americanum*) and squashberry (*V. edule*) the best tasting and most useful of native fruits. Taste is subjective, however, and some say the fruit—especially after it has been hit by frost—smells like dirty socks. Pick the fruit before frost (for obvious reasons) to make a delicious, clear red jelly. Birds, of course, relish the drupes, too.

## GROWING VIBURNUMS

VIBURNUMS ORIGINATE in habitats from marshes and bogs to upland woods. Look to nature as a guide for what will grow well in your area, and under what conditions of light, soil and moisture. As with all plants, success depends on matching the plant to the garden site.

Culturally, viburnums fall into two main groups based on their native habitats: those for wet soils and those that tolerate dry conditions. But there is some overlap, and all species thrive in rich, evenly moist soil. For example, viburnums native to wetlands, such as American cranberrybush (*V. opulus* var. *americanum*), witherod (*V. nudum* var. *cassinoides*), and arrowwood (*V. dentatum*) are perfect choices for wet spots, but will thrive under ordinary garden conditions as well.

As a general rule, the flowering and berry set will be most prolific if the shrubs are planted in full sun or very light shade. This is particularly true of blackhaw. The exceptions to this are hobblebush and mapleleaf viburnum, which require shelter from hot sun. Hobblebush, in partic-



Top: The flowers of hobblebush (*V. lantanoides*) resemble those of lacecap hydrangea. Above: The variously blue fruits of *V. nudum*.

ular, is intolerant of heat and must be planted in a cool shady site that has consistently moist soil. If you have dense shade, the choices are more limited, but in addition to hobblebush and mapleleaf viburnum, American cranberrybush will perform admirably in low light.

As viburnums mature, they form full, rounded to oval crowns that branch all the way to the ground. New canes are produced each year, displacing older stems that become moribund. Rejuvenate the clumps by removing declining canes every few years. To reduce the size or renew the entire crown, cut all stems to the ground in late winter. New shoots will be produced in spring, though plants will not flower until the following spring. With age, larger species will tend to form a few husky

trunks along with suckers and basal shoots. At this point you may choose to arborize them—encourage a treelike appearance—by retaining one to three of the stoutest trunks, and removing all other basal stems and suckers.

## PLANTING VIBURNUMS

VIBURNUMS ARE sold bare root, in containers, or nursery dug with the rootball wrapped in burlap (growers call this “balled and burlapped,” or B&B, for short). Bare-root plants are dormant—they are only available in early spring and must be planted before the buds break. Soak the bare roots for several hours in a tub of water

before planting. Trim off any broken, twisted, or overly long roots and reduce the branches by about a third, trimming off crossing or inward-facing limbs. Set the crown—the juncture of the stem and roots—level with the soil surface and water well after planting.

Container stock is readily available. Before planting, shake as much of the soil off the roots as you can because soil typically used in containers is much lighter than garden soil and may otherwise dry out. If a plant is severely pot bound, slice through the encircling roots with a sharp knife in two or three places and spread the roots out in the planting hole.

Balled-and-burlapped stock offers the least soil incompatibility and will generally become established more quickly than bare-root or container plants.

## A FEW PROBLEMS

OUR NATIVE viburnums have relatively few major pest and disease problems. Deer will eat the foliage, but they tend to prefer more succulent fare, such as hydrangeas. In the north, moose and elk chomp viburnums mercilessly. Powdery mildew, a fungal disease, is the most common problem, especially on smooth-leaved species such as blackhaw and nannyberry. Plants are most susceptible when drought stricken.

The most insidious pest is the viburnum leaf beetle (*Pyrrhalta viburni*), which is spreading around the country in nursery

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# Native Viburnum Species

MY FAVORITE OF ALL viburnums, native or exotic, is **mapleleaf viburnum** (*V. acerifolium*, Zones 4–8, 8–1), shown on page 48. The subtle beauty of this species may not impress you immediately, but in time you will appreciate its quiet charms. One major selling point is its ability to thrive and bloom in dense shade and dry soil. Its creamy white spring flowers give way to black berries on colony-forming clumps that reach four to six feet tall and wide. The best feature is undoubtedly the dusty-rose autumn foliage color, which is unique among woody plants. My woods are full of this glorious plant, and in late autumn, when most trees are bare, the last of the luminescent leaves keep company with the deep black fruits, enlivening the stark forest slopes. It is native to upland woods from New Brunswick and Wisconsin, south to northern Florida and east Texas.

**Arrowwood** (*V. dentatum*, Zones 3–8, 8–2.) is a mainstay among the limited palette of hardy shrubs available to northern gardeners. This twiggy species forms large, rounded crowns six to 12 feet tall and wide. Plants are prized for their prolific flowers and copious autumn clusters of deep blue fruits set off against wine-red foliage. The spear-shaped, toothed leaves are of medium texture, and plants are ideal as hedges and shrub borders. Several worthy selections have been made, including ‘Cardinal’,

which has deep red fall color, and a suite of trademarked introductions from Chicagoland Growers—Autumn Jazz, Chicago Lustre, and Northern Burgundy—that feature good form, fruit set, and autumn color. These cultivars are highly recommended for the upper Midwest but, according to Michael Dirr, are undistinguished in the South. This native of swamps and woodland edges from New Brunswick and Minnesota south to Florida and Texas tolerates sun or shade and thrives in wet or dry sites.

I have always loved **hobblebush** (*V. lantanoides*, formerly *V. alnifolium*, Zones 2–7, 7–1), shown on page 49, but have never been able to grow it well. It is a plant for cool-climate gardeners and is susceptible to powdery mildew in warmer and drier regions. Common at northern latitudes from Nova Scotia and Michigan south in the mountains to Georgia, this dramatic plant has luscious quilted oval leaves and lacecap-style flowers with a showy ring of sterile white flowers. Red fruits ripen to deep blue-black against leaves that may be orange, red, or maroon, or a combination of these colors. The somewhat lax stems form open, oval crowns 12 feet wide and tall.

Native in woods and fields from Nova Scotia and Alberta south to West Virginia and Iowa, **nannyberry** (*V. lentago*, Zones 2–8, 8–1) is more a tree than a shrub, with low-branching trunks 20 to 35 feet high. Pointed, ovate, glossy leaves with winged petioles turn yellow, orange, or deep red in autumn, depending on the amount of sun. Creamy, dense flower



*V. lentago*

clusters give rise to sparse clusters of black berries on carmine pedicels. ‘Deep Green’ is a prolific fruiting selection with dark green leaves. In the garden, plants tolerate sun or part shade and moist or dry soils.

You won’t find many more attractive and versatile shrubs than **possumhaw** or **smooth witherod** (*V. nudum* var. *nudum*, Zones 6–9, 9–6), shown on page 49. Lush, glossy oval leaves that turn rich purple to burgundy in autumn set off the broad, lacy flower clusters. The fruit clusters begin to color in midsummer and go through a kaleidoscopic metamorphosis from pink to red, blue, purple, and nearly black. The richly colored fruits against the flaming foliage will challenge all comers for best in show. Plants form spreading oval crowns that can reach 20 feet, but are more often six to nine feet tall. ‘Winterthur’ is a dwarf selection that grows to six feet with glossy leaves and abundant blue berries. ‘Count Pulas-ki’ is larger and more open, with fruits as colorful as its name. This is the southerly of two varieties of this



*V. dentatum*

species, ranging from New England south to Texas, mostly in the coastal plain and Piedmont. Plants thrive in sun or shade, and in moist to wet soil.

The northerly variety, **witherod** (*V. nudum* var. *cassinoides*, Zones 2–8, 8–1), was once considered a separate species and is still sometimes listed as *V. cassinoides*. It is a dense shrub



that matures into a multistemmed, treelike form to 12 feet or more tall and wide. Multicolored fruit clusters ripen unevenly in shades of yellow and red to deep powdery blue. Its spear-shaped, finely toothed foliage starts out orange and matures to deep purple. Plants thrive in soggy as well as well drained soil in sun or part shade. In the wild it is found from Newfoundland and Michigan south in the mountains to Georgia.

**American cranberrybush** (*V. opulus* var. *americanum*, Zones 2–8, 8–1) gets the prize for showiest flowers and fruits. Multistemmed, upright-oval crowns rise eight to 12 feet, with stout stems that can be limbed up to form small trees. Showy white sterile flowers surround the central cluster of fertile flowers that form large, glossy red, edible fruits in early autumn; the handsome three-lobed leaves turn deep burgundy to crimson. The decorative qualities of this species have led to a number of outstanding selections being made. ‘Andrews’, ‘Hahs’, and ‘Wentworth’ have good form and large edible fruits. ‘Compactum’ is small, twiggy, and tight at the expense of graceful form. ‘Red Wing’ has showy red petioles, good fruit set, and excellent fall color. Native to swamps and wet woods from Newfoundland to British Columbia and south to Indiana and Washington, this species thrives in sun or moderate shade, in wet or dry near-neutral soils.



**Squashberry or moosewood viburnum** (*V. edule*, Zones 2–7, 7–1) is similar to *V. opulus* var. *americanum* but ranges farther north. The three-lobed, toothed leaves are smaller, and the flowers lack the sterile flowers that make American cranberrybush



so showy. The tasty bright red fruits are widely used by Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest, who call the plant highbush cranberry, leading to some taxonomic confusion. It is found from Newfoundland, Labrador, and Alaska, south to Pennsylvania, Iowa and Washington.

The country lanes and streamsides where I live are lined with **blackhaw** (*V. prunifolium*, Zones 3–9, 9–1, shown on page 52), and the branches in autumn are always host to hungry birds. This large shrub to multistemmed small tree reaches 35 feet at maturity. The oval to nearly round, blunt-tipped leaves are deep glossy green in summer and rich scarlet to burgundy in autumn. The pendant clusters of black fruits on red pedicels last well into winter if the birds don’t get them first. This species is confined to old fields and woodland margins and needs sun and well-drained soil for best growth. Excessive drought may promote mildew, which is often a problem for this species.

**Rusty blackhaw or blue haw** (*V. rufidulum*, Zones 7–9, 9–7) is a southern version of *V. prunifolium*, with a more open crown, leaves with rust-haired petioles, and blue-black berries. Tolerant of heat and humidity, plants are native from Virginia and Kansas, south to Florida and Texas.



**Downy arrowwood** (*V. rafinesquianum*, Zones 3–8, 8–1) is a dense, very twiggy shrub similar to arrowwood but smaller overall, with smaller, narrow leaves and a finer texture. The buds are pubescent. Blue-black fruits follow the creamy flowers, and the autumn foliage is maroon. This upland species demands good drainage, is shade and drought tolerant, and grows in acid or alkaline soils.

—C.C.B.

## Resources

**Manual of Woody Landscape Plants** by Michael Dirr. Stipes Press, Champaign, Illinois. 1998.

## Sources

**Fairweather Gardens**, Greenwich, NJ. (856) 451-6261. [www.fairweathergardens.com](http://www.fairweathergardens.com). Catalog \$4.. *V. acerifolium*, *V. dentatum* Autumn Jazz, Chicago Lustre, Northern Burgundy; *V. lentago*, *V. nudum* and cultivar 'Winterthur', *V. prunifolium*, *V. rafinesquianum*.

**Forestfarm**, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7269. [www.forestfarm.com](http://www.forestfarm.com). Catalog \$5. Free if ordered online. *V. acerifolium*; *V. dentatum* and cultivar Northern Burgundy, *V. lentago*, *V. nudum* var. *cassinoides*; *V. nudum* 'Winterthur', *V. opulus* var. *americanum* cultivars 'Compactum'

and 'Wentworth', *V. prunifolium*, *V. rufidulum*.

**Prairie Moon Nursery**, Winona, MN. (507) 452-1362. [www.prairiemoonnursery.com](http://www.prairiemoonnursery.com). Catalog free. *V. acerifolium*, *V. dentatum*, *V. lentago*, *V. nudum* var. *cassinoides*, *V. rafinesquianum*.

**We-Du Nurseries**, Marion, NC. (828) 738-8300. [www.we-du.com](http://www.we-du.com). Catalog \$3. *V. dentatum* and cultivar Autumn Jazz; *V. nudum* and cultivar 'Winterthur', *V. opulus* var. *americanum* 'Compactum' and 'Hahs', *V. prunifolium*.

**Woodlanders, Inc.**, Aiken, SC. (803) 648-7522. [www.woodlanders.net](http://www.woodlanders.net). Catalog \$2. *V. acerifolium*, *V. nudum* and cultivar 'Winterthur', *V. prunifolium*, *V. rufidulum*.

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stock. Introduced into Canada from Europe in 1978, it is now making its way down the East Coast. This quarter-inch-long, dark-colored beetle lays its eggs on the stems and the larvae skeletonize the leaves. Arrowwood, American cranberrybush, and mapleleaf viburnum are extremely susceptible. Trim out infected stems before the eggs hatch, or spray the larvae with an insecticide labeled for use against this pest.

### PUTTING VIBURNUMS TO WORK IN THE GARDEN

NATURAL SYSTEMS are layered: In a forest, trees form the dominant, or highest layer, called the canopy. Below the canopy, smaller flowering trees like redbud and dogwood step down to an intimate, ceiling height. The shrub layer is the next level down. Like walls, shrubs fill the gaps between the understory and the lowest herbaceous layer.

Viburnums and other shrubs create architectural frames, or bones. Like walls, they divide and define outdoor spaces. Viburnums en masse can block or frame views, hide eyesores, and direct traffic. The contrast of a flaming bank of possumhaw heavy with multicolored fruit clusters against a backdrop of richly colored evergreens, electrifies the eye more than a single specimen with no context. Even a single specimen can make a powerful statement.




Blackhaw (*Viburnum prunifolium*) can be trained to form an attractive hedge, as shown above.

American cranberry bush in full lacy flower, laden with scarlet fruit, or covered with snow holds the eye in any context.

Viburnums are also wonderful natural trellises for vines. Grow a clematis or yellow passion vine (*Passiflora lutea*) up through an airy species like arrowwood for double the impact. Try scarlet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), Carolina jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*), or a climbing rose to augment the stout stems of blackhaw or cranberrybush.

With judicious selection and an eye for

both harmony and contrast, you can use native viburnums to meet all your shrub needs. If you can't limit yourself—and what dyed-in-the-wool hortaholic can—integrate your viburnums with other shrubby beauties to create a garden that delights the senses as well as providing a feast for birds. 

*Landscape designer C. Colston Burrell's book A Gardener's Encyclopedia of Wildflowers received the 1997 American Horticultural Society Book Award. He gardens in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.*