



Photo courtesy of
Dawn Howeth

Dogwoods

By Karin Andrews

EXUBERANT ICONS OF SPRING

As the winter doldrums have lingered on and the gray cast landscape of winter has worn out its welcome, the first glimmers of spring have stirred from a long winter's nap. Little by little, the first harbingers of spring awaken—as the stage is set for the return of joy to the landscape. At last, the lovely earthbound glories from seasons past are roused from their sleep and rise to greet the sun. Like a bold stroke of color, juxtaposed against an old black and white photograph—periwinkle, crocus, grape hyacinths, daffodils, anemones, bluebells, early tulips and the like are breaking forth—setting the stage for the return of spring.

The colors, sights, scents and timed orchestration of springtime is a miracle in itself, as layer by layer the landscape is utterly transformed. No other time of year displays the change of seasons with such orchestrated timing and panache as spring. Like the grand crescendo of a symphony at its climax—we look up to find that the high note has been reached—as the humble dogwood breaks forth into an exuberant eruption of glorious bloom. Although this transformation has been a work in progress, it is still new each year as the utterly irresistible dogwood unfurls its white, ivory, pink and red bracts before our very eyes. It is doubtful that there is any other springtime flowering tree that transforms our world in quite the same way as the delicately iconic dogwood.

DOGWOOD HABIT AND CHARACTERISTICS—

The dogwood family has almost 50 species of predominantly deciduous ornamental trees and shrubs that can be found throughout the northern hemisphere. Although most flowering dogwoods range in heights from 6 – 33 feet, some dogwoods are grown as small shrubs or even ground covers. In the United States there are 17 native species of dogwood with blooms that range from white to ivory and even a lovely pale pink.

In the late 1970s, an invasive, non-native fungal disease known as anthracnose was discovered, which has destroyed approximately 50% of our native dogwood population. As there is no cure, the only course of action is to eradicate the disease from spreading further by the introduction and propagation of disease resistant varieties. With great success, selective breeding programs have produced a wide variety of colors and shapes, as well as the required disease resistance.

Currently, there are over 100 flowering dogwood cultivars that vary in color from white to deep pinkish red. Some of these varieties have solid leathery foliage and others have delicately variegated foliage that is beautifully ornamental in its own right. If all this wasn't enough in such a versatile tree there are also shrub varieties that pack maximum impact in the shrub border or in a naturalized woodland setting.

These captivating trees and shrubs provide not only decorative benefits to the garden but they also improve soil with the ability to replenish calcium in the ground—which in turn, benefits a host of plant and animal life. Dogwoods are essential to the health and well-being of our native forests found throughout Virginia and on the east coast.

With the right growing conditions and protection from mechanical damage, dogwoods can become quite large. One of the largest flowering dogwood trees recorded, in recent history, is over 31 feet tall, with a 48 foot wide canopy spread and a trunk that measures over 3 feet in diameter. Alas, dogwoods are truly the ideal ornamental tree or large shrub as they have absolutely no equal in their class.

CARE AND MAINTENANCE—

When planting dogwood be mindful to select disease resistant varieties that have been bred to resist anthracnose. Several universities and commercial growers have created a myriad of varieties that are not only disease resistant but vary in height, bloom color, bloom size and shape. Some are even bred to have

gorgeous variegated leaf colors and exquisitely decorative petals or bracts.

Dogwoods that have been established in a woodland setting do not transplant well so care should be taken if you must move them. When planting new dogwood shrubs or trees, dig a hole three times larger than the root mass and place the tree in the hole so that the soil line (in the pot or at the top of the burlap root ball) is level with the surrounding ground. You can lay a yardstick or a shovel handle across the hole to determine where the soil line should be. When you have your tree situated, fill the hole with good top soil, tamping down the soil in the hole as you fill and water deeply. This will give your dogwood tree a great start and provide a fertile growing environment.

Water during dry spells but remember that dogwoods don't like wet feet. Place mulch on top of the soil to retain moisture, but never around the trunk of the tree as this will result in rot and suffocation of the tree.

Dogwoods are best planted in naturalized groupings or as single specimens. A driveway lined with dogwood is always stunning. Shrubby varieties are often added to shrub borders to add year round interest and the Japanese Red Twig dogwoods are often planted with grasses and other elements of the New American Landscape. Be sure to take into account the mature size of the variety when planting. You can easily "birdscape" your garden by adding dogwood to the mix.

It is very important to never use a weed eater around the base of a dogwood or any other tree for that matter, as it will damage and weaken the tree, which will then succumb to disease, lack of nutrients, insect damage and eventually death. Avoid also damaging the base of trees, above ground roots or the bark of any tree with any type of mechanical equipment.

PROPAGATION—

Dogwood trees are easily propagated by seeds, which can be sown in the fall at the edge of the wood or in nursery rows amended with sawdust, sand or a seed starter. Germination rates for healthy seed should be near 100% if sown properly. If you have the time and the room, starting dogwoods from seed is a worthwhile task. Who knows, you might even discover some new varieties or exciting plant char-

acteristics by growing your own dogwood from seed. Commercial growers and serious gardeners also propagate dogwood from cuttings and from grafting onto budded root stock, but for the homeowner and hobby gardener, growing them from seed is the easiest and most reliable method of propagation. It is important to plant the seed where you want them to remain, preferably at the edge of the woods.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The study of names and how names are derived is always intriguing and the dogwood is no exception. It is a mystery how exactly this lovely flowering tree received its name, as it seems at times to be a misnomer, but folklore and ancient languages provide a few hints as to how its name might have evolved. Scholars speculate that the dogwood's common name is a variation on the Celtic word dag or dagga. With that said, it appears that dogwood may be a corruption of dagwood, with dag being the ancient name for a meat skewer. Almost indestructible, dogwood would have made an ideal tool for skewering and turning meat.

Ancient Native Americans planted their crops when the dogwood trees were in bloom. They also created tonics and medications from the roots and bark of this exquisitely ornamental tree. In addition, dogwood trees were useful to Virginians in colonial days, as a main ingredient in producing inks, scarlet dyes, tool handles, and as a substitute for quinine and as an effective fever reducer.

For many years, the dogwood filled an important role in the textile industry, as it was ideally suited for making the shuttles for weaving machines, as its dense weight, hardness and smooth wearing properties were resistant to splitting and abrasion. The dogwood is also considered one of the best woods for making golf clubs, jeweler's benches and as wedges for splitting logs.

With regard to our canine friends, boiled dogwood bark was routinely used as a treatment for dog mange. Whoever started this practice evidently believed that the name dogwood meant that it must be good for dogs. Whether it was the dogwood tonic that cured the mange or the bath itself is unknown, but it makes for a great story.

The botanical name for the flowering dogwood tree is *Cornus Florida*. *Cornus*



DOGWOOD FOLKLORE

Separating Fact from Fiction

There is much folklore surrounding the dogwood tree which is interesting to ponder from a religious and cultural point of view. Many intriguing myths have been passed down from generation to generation regarding the dogwood tree. Some of these myths are written, others oral. Some are ancient and others, not so much.

According to legend the dogwood tree was once as straight and as tall as a mighty oak and for this reason was chosen for the cross of Calvary. It is said that the dogwood tree was deeply grieved to be used for such a purpose and that Jesus, being moved by the tree's sorrow, promised the dogwood that none of its kind would ever again grow large enough or straight enough to be used in such a way again. It is highly unlikely that a dogwood was actually used for the crucifixion, as they did not grow in Palestine, during the time of Christ, but it is an interesting thought to meditate on, particularly this time of year. Dogwood blooms are intriguing and unlike any other flowering tree and according to legend bear the symbolic nail marks of the crucifixion. The leaves which turn red in autumn and the crimson berries are also associated with the crucifixion as

being symbolic of the blood of Christ.

The dogwood tree also held great significance in the lives of Native Americans as well. Cherokee oral-tradition tells the story of a tiny race of people who lived at the edge of the forest among the dogwood trees. The "dogwood people", as they were known, believed in showing love through the practice of kindness and good deeds—just for the sake of doing so. They were the self-designated protectors of the vulnerable, which included children, the frail and elderly. It is said that they taught the Cherokee people to live in harmony with the earth and each other. Whether they were men or angels, we will never know but their impact was so profound that their legacy continues in this wonderful Cherokee legend.

Whether the dogwood causes us to think outside of ourselves or to admire its beauty and benefit to nature, it is a worthwhile tree indeed. As such it is worthy of our admiration, protection and the remembrance of what it not only means to us, but to those who have come before. It is fascinating how a simple tree can inspire the imagination and stir the soul to love and good deeds. May we all be inspired by the simple beauty of the dogwood tree.

denotes the tough nature of this wood as *Cornus* in Latin = horn. Florida refers to the native species found here in Virginia and throughout areas of the south, east coast and beyond. With that said, a loose interpretation of the botanical name could be “native tree whose wood is as tough as a horn”.

A VIRGINIA ICON—

The flowering dogwood is more than just another beautiful tree. It is an enduring symbol of spring and has brought joy, healing and even hope to many throughout the ages.

On March 6, 1918, with the support of Garden Clubs throughout Virginia, the humble American dogwood (*Cornus Florida*) was adopted by the General Assembly as the floral emblem of Virginia.

It is fitting indeed that this tree, so loved by Virginians, is forever a symbol of our great Commonwealth. There is no other blooming tree arrayed as beautifully or with such joie de vivre as the dogwood. If you plant only one tree this year, may it be a dogwood! I know mine will be. 

