

## Flowering Dogwood, Prima Donna of Trees

By Susan Camp

The nights have remained cold and frosty and the days unseasonably cool since we arrived home from Houston three weeks ago. Finally, after the first flush of flowering Bradford pear, the region is reawakening, and despite the many species of wildflowers, native grasses, and budding trees that we viewed on our trip, nothing compares to the Colonial Parkway in spring when the redbuds and native dogwoods are blooming.

Flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) is the state tree and flower of Virginia. *C. florida* is native to eastern and south-central North America. A similar subspecies is native to northeastern Mexico. Considered the most beautiful of the spring-flowering trees, *C. florida* grows naturally in dappled shade beneath larger trees in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 through 9. It requires moist, deep, well-drained, acid soil that is rich in organic material.

Flowering dogwood is a flat-topped tree with horizontal upper branches and drooping lower branches. The oval leaves are 3 to 6 inches long and are silvery-green on the underside. In the fall the leaves turn deep maroon. The lovely white “blossoms” that greet us every spring actually are bracts, or modified leaves. Bract color ranges from greenish-white to pink to red, depending on the cultivar. The four bracts surround the true flowers, a tight cluster of yellowish-green buttons. In the fall, the bright red fruits attract birds, but are reported to be bitter, and possibly toxic to humans. I once watched a female wild turkey harvest dogwood fruits by repeatedly jumping up and hitting the branches to knock them onto the ground, where the rest of the turkeys ate them as fast as they could.

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.

There is good news, because a wild dogwood found 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.

*C. florida* tolerates deer, black walnut trees, and clay soil. 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.

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 and healthy. 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.

Flowering 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.

April 26, 2018