

# Viburnums

by John Neorr, Native Plant Steward

Here's a scary thought - in the same sentence *Viburnum opulus* is described as "used for making jelly" and "slightly toxic." Hmm ... I'll take the grape jelly, thank you. "Viburnum" is the common name (as well as the genus) applied to a jelly-making, tummy-aching shrub or tree-like plant that, within its 150 different species and countless cultivars has a wide range of characteristics. Apparently, from the referenced quote, even the same species can have significantly different characteristics.



Tasty *V. trilobum*

First, to clear up the contradiction regarding the palatability of *Viburnum opulus*, we need to look at its (sometimes) common name, highbush cranberry. As it turns out, like a lot of common names, this common name is applied at various times, by various people, to more than one species. In this case, *Viburnum opulus*, or European highbush cranberry (the bad tastin' stuff); *V. trilobum*, American highbush cranberry (the good tastin' stuff); and *V. edule* (the even better tastin' stuff).

*V. edule* is more often called squashberry or mooseberry. Squashberry is a Washington native, and even though you might consider its bright red berries tart, the birds love them. If you decide to make a jam or jelly from any of these berries, it is advisable to freeze them first in order to remove some of their tartness.



Tastier *V. edule*

As noted above, viburnums provide a wide variety of characteristics depending



Leatherleaf viburnum

on the species selected. They are not too choosy about planting site – growing well in full sun through partial shade and tolerating alkaline as well as acidic soils. With the possible exception of squashberry, viburnums prefer well-drained soil. Some viburnums are deciduous and others are evergreen.

Leatherleaf Viburnum (*Viburnum rhytidophyllum*) is one of the most hardy of the evergreen viburnums. Although a slow grower, this species can grow to 10' tall. All viburnums can be pruned to control their growth and shape. It is best to prune viburnums in the spring or summer after they have flowered or if you want to insure maximum berries for the birds, prune right after the berries have dropped or the birds have eaten them. Another evergreen favorite (I see a lot of it) is *V. davidii*. This plant is hardy and low-growing, making it a useful border plant for year-round color. Viburnums generally do not require a lot of care. I suspect most are drought

tolerant or at least have low water needs after the first year or two. I reviewed several drought tolerant lists, and found a wide variety (and somewhat inconsistent) set of viburnums listed. Only the highbush cranberry is consistently listed as needing “moist” soil.

Several viburnums are quite fragrant – the most commonly noted being *V. carlesii* or Korean Spice Viburnum. This shrub has beautiful pink-tinged flowers and provides year-round interest with its flowers in the spring followed by deep purple berries leading up to brilliant red leaves in the fall. This plant is intermediate in size, growing up to 6’ feet tall. Like other viburnum species, *V. carlesii* has several cultivars, but they are rumored to be less fragrant than the original species. Another fragrant species is *V. farreri*, a deciduous shrub that is best pruned to tame its legginess. *V. burkwoodii*, a cross between *V. carlesii* and *V. utile* is also a fragrant variety. It is larger than *V. carlesii* (growing up to 10”) and during mild winters may retain its leaves.



Korean Spice Viburnum - *V. carlesii*  
Courtesy of Michigan State University x

The fruit (berries) of viburnums has been mentioned several times. It is a good idea to get a least two plants to insure cross pollination. Most berries tend to be either black or red. *V. opulus* berries start yellowish-orange and migrate to bright red. For difficult sites, you may want to try *V. lantana*. This somewhat tall, lanky plant does not have showy flowers, but its berries are quite colorful, changing from yellow, to red, to black. Berries of each color can be present on the shrub at the same time. ‘Mohican’ is the most popular cultivar of this species.

My favorite viburnum is the *Viburnum plicatum* v. ‘*tomentosum*’ or Doublefile Viburnum. Although you can let this shrub grow from several shoots, I have trimmed mine so that it has a single “trunk” much like a small tree. I’ll admit the trunk is a little curvy, but I like the look of the resulting canopy (which is also eminently pruneable). This variety of *V. plicatum* is a deciduous shrub/small tree which can grow to 10’ tall. It has prolific, beautiful white flower that are made



My favorite, *V. plicatum* v. *tomentosum*

more prominent by its wide horizontally spread and curvy branches. This effect can be accentuated by judicious pruning. Although *tomentosum* is purported to produce red berries, I have not seen that on my plant yet. This may be because I only have one of these plants or that I have a cultivar, of which there are several. The cultivar ‘*Mariesii*’ further exploits horizontal

growth and is perhaps the most showy of the '*tomentosum*' variety. Shorter cultivars of this lovely plant include 'Shoshoni' at 5'-8' and 'Summer Snowflake' at 4'-6'. An added advantage of 'Summer Snowflake' is that is purported to bloom all summer through the fall. Like all viburnums, *V. plicatum* likes well-drained soil.

I checked the Arboretum nursery to see what we had available and found most of



Winter bloomer, *V. x bodnantense*

the species noted in this article. I did not find *V. carlesii*, but I did find two other very interesting plants. Both evergreens, *V. x bodnantense* (Dawn Viburnum), which has pink blossoms, and *V. tinus* 'Spring Bouquet,' which has white, and actually bloom in the winter! The Dawn Viburnum not only produces somewhat unusual pink flowers, but puts on an extremely colorful show in the fall as its leaves turn various shades of

purple, green and red. You may want to consider it as an alternative or companion to witch hazel.

As you can see, viburnums provide a wide variety of characteristics. If you select a viburnum for your yard, be sure to pick one that meets your requirements. Large or small, evergreen or deciduous, tasty or yucky, there is one out there for you.