

Life's a Garden, Dig It

# Flowering dogwoods: a sure sign of spring



By Larry Newman

Traveling around central VA the last two weeks has reminded me just how beautiful spring is. Trees and shrubs are bursting with color, lawns are greening up, and birds serenade us at sunrise. One tree in particular has been especially brilliant this year. The flowering dogwood, or *Cornus florida* for those who prefer the scientific name, is the state tree and the state flower of Virginia. The four white "flowers" of the flowering dogwood are actually bracts that surround the true yellow flowers in the center of the cluster.

The flowering dogwood is known as an understory tree, meaning it grows in the shade of taller trees in the forest. It rarely exceeds 30 feet in height, although one specimen in Middlesex County was last measured in 2010 at an impressive 57 feet. Flowering dogwood is native to Virginia and in its natural conditions it grows in association with beech, maple, oak, and hickory trees. Flowering dogwood is typically seen at the edge of fields, utility easements, and clearings in the forest and found throughout Virginia except at the highest elevations of the mountains.

Unfortunately, since the 1980s, a fungal disease known as *Discula destructiva*, also known as anthracnose, has killed many native trees in the forest where the conditions are more humid. Trees nearer to open areas where the conditions are less favorable to the disease have fared much better. Fear not for those of you who are considering adding a flowering dogwood to your landscape. Since the onset of the disease, planting recommendations have changed to planting the tree in full sun areas with good air circulation. There are over 100 cultivars (plant varieties) of flowering dogwoods with some developed since the early '90s. Bracts that are pink, red, and shades of each are found in many landscapes. This truly is a four-season tree. Brilliant red berries are the fruit of the tree in September and October. The leaves turn a reddish-

purple in the fall, and the square-to-rectangular, greyish brown, block-like bark provides winter interest.

The tree does best in acidic soil with pH ranging from 5.5 to 6.0. Follow good planting practices as with any tree. Dig the planting hole two to three times the width of the root ball and only as deep as the root flare at the trunk. Create a mulch ring at least two feet wider than the branch width of the tree when planting. The mulch depth is three to four inches, but do not let the mulch touch the bark of the tree. The tree will need to be watered a little more frequently but it does not like wet soil. Water one to two inches per week, especially during dry periods. Keeping the tree stress-free is the best disease prevention.

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