

As potential garden candidates, native *Viburnums* present a fairly convenient and quite dependable source of spring/summer blooming interest and excellent fall/winter color. Worldwide, approximately 130 species of *Viburnums* exist. They are limited primarily to temperate and subtropical habitats within the Old and New World. Here along the Gulf Coastal Plain, several species exist which lend themselves well to cultivated situations. All these possess small, perfect, white to off-white flowers that are mostly arranged into cymes (flat-topped, terminal clusters), which give way to attractive clusters of blue/black fruits that birds relish. Foliage size, shape, color, and margination, however, vary widely from species to species. Listed below are species with which I've had at least some personal experience in garden settings.

I'll dispense with *Viburnum nudum*, Possumhaw *Viburnum* (illus. p.9), first. I've had the least amount of experience (and success) with it. Still, this should not deter those of you who garden in more acidic, seasonally damp soils. This fairly large, 7-10 foot, rangy shrub features multiple stems and larger, elliptic to elliptic-oblongate, coarse textured leaves. The leaves turn pleasing shades of red during the fall and winter months. It inhabits the damp, sandy, acidic soils of bogs and low creek banks, often in association with the native pink/white azalea, *Rhododendron canescens*. In my experience, this plant has not done well in the more circumneutral, alluvial loams that many of us garden in.

By contrast, *V. dentatum*, Arrowwood *Viburnum* (illus. p.5), is probably the most adaptable of the group, flourishing in a wide variety of soils and exposures. It produces bright-white, late spring/early summer blooms, and outstanding fall/winter colors that range from rather dull maroon to very bright orange-red. This depends, I believe, on a combination of soil type, sun exposure, and genetic strain. Foliage is ovate in shape, with distinctly dentate margins. Houston-based garden designer and plantsman, Will Flemming, suggests that there are two probable "varieties" of this species; a larger-leaved (with coarser dentations), upright, 9-12 foot "tree type," and a smaller-leaved, spreading, multi-stemmed "shrub-type," which he separates as such in his nursery. Fruit color ranges from a rich, dark indigo-blue to blackish. I've used this species in many soils, from mildly acidic loams to circum-neutral clays (it will work in more acidic, sand-based soils as well), and in many exposures, from full sun to deep shade. I was first introduced to *V. ashei*, a very similar species with smaller, shinier, more finely dentate leaves, by southeastern Louisiana designer/plantsman, John Mayronne, about ten years ago. This uncommon shrub grows to about 6-7 feet, is multi-stemmed, and provides a more refined texture in the garden. It, too, seems as adaptable as *V. dentatum*. Ed. note: *V. ashei* is AKA *V. dentatum* var. *cabrellum*, illus. p.1.

Rusty Blackhaw *Viburnum*, *V. rufidulum* (illus. above), is a tree-type species possessing wonderful, finely serrated, elliptic-obovate leaves that are leathery and exceedingly lustrous in appearance. Within its natural habitat range of dryish, silt to sand-loam, tertiary soils, it grows to a small (12 foot) tree. It will have a rather dense, umbrella-shaped crown, somewhat mimicking that of a downsized flowering dogwood, and would go well with this species in planted landscapes. Both appreciate the same conditions (protected exposures, well-drained soils). As you would guess from its common name, fall/winter color on this species is an eye-popping rusty-red, often mixed with tinges of yellow-orange. In less mellow, alluvial-based soils, this species is much slower growing, and most often takes on a shrubbier appearance, but is a nice addition, none the less.

The real sleeper of the group, *V. obovatum*, called Walter's or Little-leaf *Viburnum*. It is a rare inhabitant of wetter, alluvial woodlands (very occasionally, open sandier uplands) in limited parts of

coastal South Carolina, Georgia, northern Florida, and extreme southeastern Alabama. I was first introduced to this uncommon species at the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve in Saline, LA. Two fine old specimens exist there, gifts from Dr. W. Ashe (fide Briarwood curator, Richard Johnson, refers to this plant by an old common name, "the Florida snowball viburnum") and planted back in the 1940's by Miss Dormon, herself. On the dry, low, sand ridge where they were planted, one of them exists as a small tree with a dense, umbrella-type crown; the other, a 10 foot columnar shrub. In early spring, both are absolutely jam-packed with pure-white, rounded bloom clusters, which look even more prominent against the background of small, dark-green, oblanceolate to obovate leaves. Will Flemming, and his mentor, Lynn Lowrey, have been quietly using this little-known plant in landscapes between Beaumont and Corpus Christi for some time now. The genetic strain that Lowrey introduced into propagation years ago is definitely superior to the one which is currently produced by eastern Gulf Coast growers. Its leaves, while still quite small, are somewhat larger and deeper green than the latter strain. Down in lower zone eight and zone nine gardens, it is mostly evergreen, except in harsher winters when many leaves will turn pleasing hues of yellow and red. The fruits, while not dependably produced on a year-in, year-out basis in most Texas landscapes, are black and "patent leather" shiny. In essence, the small-leaved, refined look, combined with the multiplicity of brilliant white, early spring bloom clusters produced by this plant, place it at the very top of the heap. I am of the opinion that it can be sheared to whatever shape and size desired, and can take its place among the best shrubs currently used in formal landscapes such as boxwood, dwarf yaupon, and oriental azaleas. Too, this species seems to exhibit almost unlimited adaptability through a wide range of gardening soils and exposures. Flemming seems convinced that it will happily grow in periodic standing water. I have recently planted a couple in such situations on my own property, straight into yucky, black, circumneutral clay, to evaluate his claim.

Lastly, I should mention Maple-leaf Viburnum, *V. acerfolium* (illus. at right). It is a small (18-24 inches), stoloniferous, understory species that forms loose, sometimes extensive, colonies in dry to mesic upland woods throughout much of eastern Canada and the U.S. Here in Louisiana, I've most often seen it associated with white oak, flowering dogwood, sassafras, horse sugar and sometimes other, like sourwood and deciduous magnolias, along acidic slopes in the central part of the state. Its prominent, spring-green, maple-shaped (like *Acer rubrum*, trident red maple) leaves, white bloom clusters; shiny, dark fruit clusters, and bright, "Merthiolate-orange" fall color render it a very showy denizen of the forest floor. Under the proper conditions, which are lightly shaded acidic soils, this species possesses the capability to form a nice, loose groundcover that should be quite attractive in all seasons but winter. At this point, I've not used it anywhere except for a small, well-drained, shady site on my property, where it has more or less sulked (but hasn't given up the ghost!) for the past three years. Bill Fontenot is a past president of the LNPS. He is curator of the Acadiana Park Nature Station in Lafayette, a popular speaker, & author of *Native Gardening in the South*. He and his wife, Lydia, own Prairie Basse Nursery in Carencro.

Where to find Viburnums

*Viburnum obovatum*, *V. dentatum*, and occasionally *V. rufidulum* are available from Prairie Basse Nursery, 217 St. Fidelis, Carencro, LA, 70520.