

## FAVORITE CHILD

Susie Quinlan Hill, Frederick County Master Gardener

Asking me to pick a favorite shrub is like asking me to pick a favorite child. Selecting a favorite tree is not so difficult. I know this favorite in all forms. I know the nuances of its twigs. I recognize its flower buds in the winter. I can pick it out in a forest from a distance or up close by looking at the bark. Hands down, my favorite tree is our native dogwood, *Cornus florida*.

Out of a line-up with many strong contenders, the first tree I picked to plant in my yard was our native dogwood. I love the dogwood for a plethora of reasons, one of which is its great horticultural contribution to the beauty of the landscape throughout the year. The reason it was the first tree I planted, however, is because it has berries that are a valuable food source for birds.

In the autumn, as many species of birds begin their migrations south, the dogwood provides a valuable food source. The brilliant red berries make them highly visible to birds from their vantage point in the sky. Those berries that don't get eaten lose their vibrancy but are appreciated by the birds that are with us in the winter, such as catbirds and tufted titmice. In addition to its extremely high wildlife value for birds as well as mammals, the dogwood could easily win a beauty pageant in the fall, its garnet foliage offsetting that strong crop of brilliant red berries.

As if the autumn season alone weren't enough to inspire one to plant a dogwood, spring and summer offer good reasons to plant a dogwood too. In the spring, the plants put on a beautiful display of creamy white bracts that last for a period of about three weeks. These bracts present themselves as flowers but they are actually modified leaves designed to draw attention to the very modest true flowers that are located in the center. The color of the bracts is cooperative, working in tandem with other blooms that may be more demanding of attention.

In the summertime, dogwoods quietly blend into the landscape and allow other plants to shine. As a small understory tree, they are inclined to reach for sunshine in their native forest environment. When grown in full sun, the plants will take on a much more full and rounded appearance. As with any small tree grown in tight landscape quarters, the trees should be gradually limbed up as they grow to allow comfortable human passage below the stems. While the plants are dormant, remove limbs from the bottom of the tree, never removing more than one third of the plant tissue at a time.

Last, but never least, is the season of winter, which should never be discounted. Winter is the time of year when I get to see birds perch to fluff their feathers for an extra layer of insulation and berries that were overlooked in the fall fill hungry stomachs.

Throughout my lifetime, I have enjoyed the beauty of our native dogwood in the landscape, both in nature and in my own yard. I thought I had seen it in all forms and seasons until recently when I experienced the joy of bearing witness to the dogwood from an undiscovered perspective. Following an ice storm, I was outside at night. The lights from the front porch lit the ice,

emphasizing the beautiful form of my beloved tree against the night sky. As I gazed in wonder from below, Orion appeared to be gazing down in appreciation too. Perhaps our native child, *Cornus florida*, is Orion's favorite too.



*An ice storm highlights the beauty of our native dogwood, *Cornus florida*, in the winter.*

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