

Selecting the Right Shrub

By Susan Camp

“You can’t always get what you want,” famously sang the Rolling Stones back in 1969. The Stones were singing about happiness, but the same often holds true in gardening. In January of this year, I wrote about a small terrace and garden installation on the site of our granddaughter Emma’s old playhouse. The terrace has settled in comfortably beneath some mature shade trees, with a small crescent of daffodils, irises and the ‘New Dawn’ rose on one side and newly planted azaleas to enclose the area on two other sides. The terrace sits close to the garage, and as is the case with most garages, stacks of bricks, blocks, and wood are piled behind the building.

We needed three tall, wide, and evergreen shrubs to hide the building supplies behind the garage. We had never grown viburnums, so we decided to look for a species that would fit my criteria, and at first, I thought we had found it. *Viburnum awabuki* ‘Chindo’ is a hardy evergreen with large, leathery, dark green leaves and clusters of fragrant white flowers in spring that develop into bright red berries that ripen to black in the fall. ‘Chindo’ seemed perfect, except for one detail: It is native to South Korea, and I really wanted to plant a Virginia native.

I respect the native plant movement, and we grow many native perennials on our property. We also grow daffodils, irises, roses, peonies, hydrangeas, and azaleas, and I have no desire or intent to remove them. We have non-native trees that were planted by the former owners, as well as native trees that have either grown here for many years, or were planted by us when we first moved to Gloucester.

I’m not sure why in this situation I was so determined not to plant non-native shrubs, but there was no convincing me otherwise. Fortunately, a local nursery worked with us to obtain *Viburnum dentatum* (Arrowwood or Southern Arrowwood), a species native to Eastern North America from southern New Brunswick, Canada to Georgia. It is found in swampy, marshy, or wooded areas.

Arrowwood is a multi-stemmed, upright deciduous shrub that reaches a mature height of 6 to 15 feet with a similar spread. Oval, toothed, glossy, dark green leaves change in fall to yellow and red. In spring, flat-topped clusters of creamy-white flowers attract butterflies and native and honey bees. Arrowwood is a larval food plant for the Spring Azure butterfly, and attracts the Question Mark, Eastern Comma, and Red Admiral butterflies. The flowers develop into blue-black berries that provide food for the Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, Northern Flicker, and Gray Catbird.

Arrowwood grows well in full sun to part shade in average well-drained soils with a pH of 6.8 or less, but will tolerate clay soils. It is also rated as highly resistant to deer in the publication “Landscape Plants Rated by Deer Resistance” on the Rutgers University “New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station” website.

The expected lifespan of *V. dentatum* is 20 to 50 years. Few serious diseases and insect pests affect it. Powdery and downy mildews and leafspot are sometimes seen. Whiteflies, aphids, and spider mites are occasionally found. Unfortunately, Japanese beetles will munch on the leaves. A serious pest is the viburnum leaf beetle. Identified in Canada in the mid-20th century, this defoliating pest has invaded the Northeast, North Central States, and Pacific Northwest and British Columbia. It has not moved south yet, possibly because our winters are too warm.

Several other native viburnums are suitable for planting on the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck. You can find thumbnail sketches in “Native Plants for Southeast Virginia Including Hampton Roads Region.” NC State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “*Viburnum dentatum*” provides information on this native shrub.

The moral here is that it may not be easy to find the exact plant you want, or as the Stones said:

“But if you try sometimes, well, you might find
You get what you need.”

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