

# Getting the dogwood growing



**Chris Rusch**  
Master Gardener

**QUESTION:** Can you give me some tips on growing dogwood trees in the Umpqua Valley?

**ANSWER:** There are over 45 species of dogwoods in the world, ranging from small shrubs to single-trunked trees. The Pacific dogwood (*Cornus nutalli*), is native to the Pacific Northwest. It grows best in partially shady sites and is found in the forest understory throughout the Umpqua Valley. Our native tree grows to 50 feet tall, but 'Starlight', 'Venus', and other named varieties are better suited to the garden or yard, growing 20 to 30 feet tall. Autumn leaves come in shades of yellow, pink and red and are followed by interesting bark patterns in winter.

Although dogwoods have been around for centuries, they were first labeled with the term "dog tree" in 1548, derived from the word "dagwood" because the slender stems were used for making daggers, arrows, and skewers. In 1614, the name changed to "dogwood."

For landscaped areas, dogwoods provide three seasons of interest with red, pink or white flower bracts in the spring, red berries in the summer, and attractive red to burgundy colored leaves in the fall. The flowers and berries support native wildlife such as pollinators, birds, and small mammals. At least 36 different species of birds feast on the dogwood's fleshy red berries, including bluebirds, juncos, and waxwings. Robins and sparrows will also build nests on the dogwood's



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PIXABAY

Flower bracts are often confused as being the actual flower bloom of a dogwood tree.

horizontal branches.

The showy part of the dogwood flower is not the flower at all but the bracts! The true flower is greenish yellow and insignificant. The bracts are white (some species are pink or red) and about 2 inches long, and emerge in the spring.

Proper tree care is a must from the moment your dogwood is planted in the soil. You can plant dogwoods in the spring or fall. Dig an extra wide hole to ensure the roots have room to grow outwards. Don't plant too deeply; the root flare should be above ground level. For container grown dogwoods, loosen the root ball with a soil knife to prevent the roots from continuing to grow in the circular shape of the pot. For bare root dogwoods, soak the roots in a bucket of water prior to planting. Finally, water your dogwood to settle the soil. The key to maintaining the health of your dogwood is to plant it in a



Dogwoods deliver these bright berries that many bird species are delighted to dine on regularly.

suitable location and take proper care of your tree to minimize stress. Dogwoods prefer an acidic, well-drained soil that contains a significant amount of organic matter. They are not tolerant of hot and dry, poorly drained sites, or flooding.

Dogwoods are shallow-rooted and do not compete well with turf. They may need irrigation during the drier months of July and August. If overhead irrigation is applied, water early to allow

the leaves to dry before nightfall, which will minimize disease problems. The soil surrounding your tree will need to be mulched regularly. Your dogwood tree will also require periodic pruning; note that over-pruning a tree puts it at great risk of disease, as bacteria and fungi can enter through improperly cut branches.

There are several hybrids between the native flowering dogwood and the non-native Kousa dogwood that exhibit

better disease resistance and longer bloom periods than the native species. Examples include:

■ Flowering dogwood (*C. florida*): This tree has a graceful habit, with horizontal layers of branches that provide multi-levels of attraction. The canopy grows wider than tall, with most types growing slowly to 15 to 25 feet tall. Leaves turn glowing red in fall, with fruit lasting into winter.

■ Eddie's White Wonder dogwood: This is a spectacular cultivar of Korean dogwood. It is blanketed in large, white star-shaped flowers in spring and strawberry red color in fall. Its 20-foot stature makes it ideal for small spaces. Other kousa dogwoods are outstanding as well, most turning a deep crimson-purple in autumn.

■ Cornus stellar series: This group of disease-resistant, single-trunked hybrid dogwoods is available in white and pink forms. It

grows to about 20 feet tall and features brilliant autumn color. These are unique in that the blooms appear with the leaves.

Americans' love for the dogwood was inspired by two of our founding fathers. George Washington planted dogwoods at Mount Vernon, obtaining many of his trees from the surrounding forest. Thomas Jefferson planted dogwoods at Monticello in the late 1770's, which inspired Virginia lawmakers to select the American dogwood as the state flower in 1918.

*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*