



ORDER YOUR ALMANAC TODAY!

HOME > GARDENING > GROWING GUIDES

How to Grow and Care for a Smokebush: A Complete Gardener's Guide



Royal purple smokebush is the focal point of this perennial garden.

Photo Credit: Molly Shannon

Bot

ani-

cal

Na

me:

Cotinus

coggy-

gria

Pla

nt

Typ

e:

[Shrubs](#)

[and](#)

[Bushes](#)

Su

n

Exp

--

[Full Sun](#),

[Part Sun](#)

FREE GUIDE!



ure
:

Soil [Varies](#)
pH:

Blo [Spring](#) ,
om [Summer](#)
Tim
e:

Flo [Varies](#)
wer
Col
or:

Har [4](#) , [5](#) , [6](#) ,
di- [7](#) , [8](#)
nes
s
Zon
e:

Spe [Deer-](#)
cial [resistant](#)
Fea
tur
es:

Planting, Growing, and Pruning Smokebush Plants

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: March 5, 2025



Sign up for daily gardening advice and tips

[SIGN UP](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Dusky burgundy, fast-growing, and deer-resistant shrubs are hard to find. Whether you're looking for a specimen plant or an entire hedge, smokebush (also called smoke bush) can fit the bill. From plant care to pruning, here's our growing guide.

About Smokebush

ADVERTISEMENT

To answer the first question, smokebush (*Cotinus*) is the same plant as smoketree, and often written as "smoke bush." This large, deciduous shrub can be trained as a small tree and grows 12 to 15 inches tall with an equal spread. New dwarf cultivars are available for smaller spaces. This genus is in the Anacardiaceae family, cousin to sumacs and cashews.

The original species plant, *Cotinus coggygria*, is less often grown today, as the purple-leaved cultivars are more desired in the landscape. The 'Royal Purple' cultivar is probably the most popular and easy to find. If you've seen a smokebush in a yard, that's likely the one.

Smokebush shrubs are cold-hardy in USDA Zones 4 to 8, but the one in my yard regularly survives the Zone 3 temperatures I occasionally experience.

These shrubs get their name from the airy seed heads, which look like asparagus fronds and cover the top of the shrub in thin, wispy plumes of color. However, many gardeners enjoy the abundant, dark burgundy and purple foliage more. The shrubs sport thick, oblique to round leaves with prominent veining. Flowers appear in late spring, but the gorgeous seed heads remain for much of the summer.

ADVERTISEMENT



*The flower heads of Cotinus coggygria
'Young Lady' (Smoke Bush) in summer.
Credit: iPlantsman*

Purple cultivars of smokebushes are well suited to provide contrasting colors. They work well as specimen plantings to show off yellows, bright greens, and blues. A dwarf blue spruce, some black-eyed Susans, a smokebush, and some ornamental grass planted together in a bed create a low-maintenance block of color and some visual screening for unwanted views.

Smokebushes make excellent screening plants or [hedges](#) for the warmer months when you will likely be out and about in the yard.

Amazingly, deer tend to leave smokebush alone for a rapidly growing (when pruned) deciduous shrub. Even new growth is rarely bothered, which is reason enough for many of us to plant it. [See deer-resistant plants.](#)

Smokebushes have a fibrous root system, making them easy to transplant and drought-tolerant once established. Many cultivars turn a brilliant [scarlet orange or purple in autumn](#).

ADVERTISEMENT

Read Next

- [How to Grow Weigela Shrubs \(The Complete Guide\)](#)
- [Growing Oleander: The Complete Guide](#)
- [How to Grow Mock Orange: The Complete Guide](#)

PLANTING

Smokebushes do best in full sun but will be alright in partial shade. Heavy shade will cause them to grow slowly, if at all, and purple cultivars may start to revert to green in an attempt to efficiently harvest the little light

quately drained—no ponding or wet spots.

Most soil types are suitable, provided there is drainage, and these shrubs are not picky about soil pH.

Smokebushes can get quite large and take over a corner or gap in the yard. They often reach 15 feet high and nearly as wide if left to their own devices. However, as discussed below, heavy pruning is a good way to keep them manageable and encourage more dense foliage.

When to Plant Smokebush

Like many woody shrubs, smokebushes can be planted in spring or fall. Most of us buy them at the garden center in spring and plunk them into the ground shortly thereafter. If planting in autumn, try to get them in the ground as soon as the weather starts to cool and at least 6 weeks before the ground freezes so the roots can settle in.

How to Plant Smokebush

Smokebushes are typically purchased as containerized stock from a nursery or garden center, however they are also available bare-root. For containerized stock, wait to plant

spring. If it was on display indoors, remember to harden it off. Plant bare-root smoke bushes as soon as possible in spring while the shrub is still dormant.

To plant containerized smokebush:

- Water thoroughly while your smokebush is still in the pot.
- Dig the hole and prepare the site, removing stones, roots, turf, and weeds. The hole should have sloping sides similar to a bowl.
- Squeeze the edges of the plastic nursery pot to work the plant free from its container. Rolling it around on the ground while pressing down to deform the side of the pot works well.
- Trim any circling roots and score the edges of the rootball.
- Test fit the plant in the hole. The soil level of the plant's rootball should match or be slightly higher than the surrounding ground. Loosen the bottom of the hole with your trowel. Dig or fill in as necessary.
- Replace the soil, applying light but firm pressure as you go to eliminate air pockets around the roots.

- Water deeply. If the water just runs off, form a small wall of soil around the plant in a ring.
- Add a layer of mulch but avoid piling it up around the stem.

To plant bare-root smokebush:

- Prior to planting, soak the roots in a bucket of water for 1–2 hours.
- Prepare the planting site, digging a hole slightly deeper than the roots and 6 inches wider on all sides. You'll need a hole large enough to spread the roots out when you plant.
- Test fit the smokebush in the hole and adjust the depth as necessary by adding or removing soil. Plant it with the crown just at or slightly higher than the surrounding ground level. A soil stain on the stem bark often indicates how deep it was grown at the nursery.
- Trim off any broken roots, spread them out, and fill in the soil. Take care to keep the shrubbery upright.
- When halfway filled, water the shrub, then continue filling the hole, pressing lightly but firmly to remove air pockets as you replace the soil.
- When finished, water again thoroughly.
- Apply a layer of mulch and stake

GROWING

Smokebushes' only real need, once they are established, is a bit of pruning. They're pretty much maintenance-free.

How to Grow Smokebush

Newly planted smokebushes need to be given water weekly for the first growing season unless sufficient rain has fallen. After that, they are pretty independent.

No fertilizer is required. Mulch around them to keep weeds and grass from growing up, as their multi-stemmed trunks make access with the string trimmer difficult and also hazardous to the shrub.

Pruning Smokebush

Smokebushes respond very vigorously to heavy pruning, which I discovered by accident. The one in my yard was overgrown, gangly, and unattractive. In a fit of frustration one day in early spring, I whacked it all the way to the ground and then mowed over the top of it. I figured it would die, and I'd never bother to dig it up. What I did not expect was

pruning had turned this ugly plant into a beautiful full shrub with gorgeous purple foliage.

ADVERTISEMENT

I don't recommend mowing your smokebush as a way to rejuvenate it, but pruning it down to about 6-8 inches above the ground will cause a huge flush of new growth. Gardeners who want the foliage but aren't as concerned about the flowers often do this frequently. Of note, heavy pruning will delay flowering for a year.

Types

- 'Royal Purple' is a common, easy-to-find cultivar with deep, dusky pink inflorescences and burgundy green leaves. It is hardy in USDA Zones 4-8 and reaches about 12-15 feet tall and wide if

- ‘Winecraft Black’ is a dwarf variety, reaching 4-6 feet tall and wide. Deeply purple-black foliage and smaller size make it adaptable to growing in large containers.
- ‘Daydream’ blooms in panicles of light pink to maroon with fall foliage in brilliant oranges and purples. It’s cold hardy in USDA Zones 5-8.



Winecraft Black® Smokebush (*Cotinus coggygria*). Dwarf habit. Credit: Proven Winners

GARDENING PRODUCTS

<p>Vegetable 4-6-2</p> <p>\$8.99</p> <p>BUY NOW</p>	<p>Houseplant 8-3-1</p> <p>\$9.99</p> <p>BUY NOW</p>	<p>All Purpose 4-6-2</p> <p>\$8.79</p> <p>BUY NOW</p>

PESTS/DISEASES

Smokebushes are not often bothered by pests or disease but may exhibit susceptibility to rusts and verticillium wilt.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Smokebushes pruned regularly make an excellent summertime hedge for visual screening. Plant them 3–4 feet apart and prune them regularly for shape, or prune them hard in late winter to encourage bushy, thick growth.
- Some people have a reaction to the sap; wear gloves and long sleeves when pruning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture. [Read More from Andy Wilcox](#)

MORE LIKE THIS



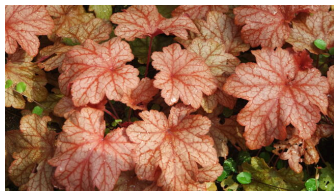
How to Grow Weigela Shrubs (The Complete Guide)



Growing Oleander: The Complete Guide



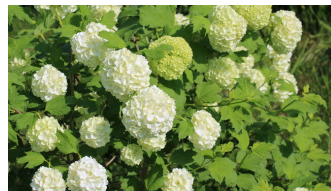
How to Grow Mock Orange: The Complete Guide



Coral Bell Plants: The Complete Guide to Growing



How to Grow Holly Bushes



How to Grow a Viburnum Shrub

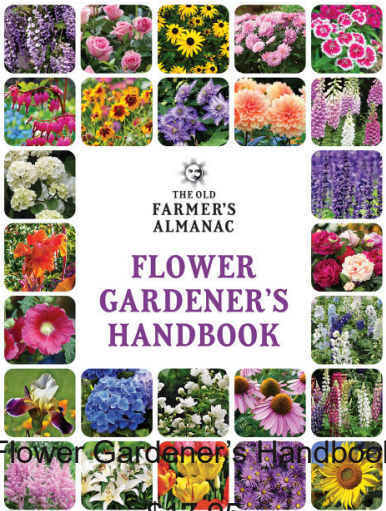
ADVERTISEMENT

COMMENTS

ADD A COMMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

THE OLD FARMER'S STORE

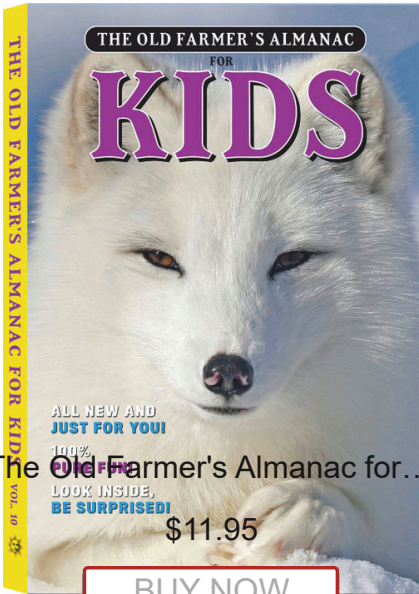


THE OLD FARMER'S ALMANAC
FLOWER GARDENER'S HANDBOOK

Flower Gardener's Handbook

\$17.95

BUY NOW



THE OLD FARMER'S ALMANAC
FOR KIDS

ALL NEW AND JUST FOR YOU!
100% NEW!
LOOK INSIDE, BE SURPRISED!

The Old Farmer's Almanac for...

\$11.95

BUY NOW



Old Hancock Suncatcher Set ...

\$31.95

[BUY NOW](#)

RHS Ratchet Pruner

\$39.95

[BUY NOW](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Our Brands

[The Old Farmer's](#)[Almanac for Kids](#)[Yankee Magazine](#)[Family Tree Magazine](#)[NH Business Review](#)[New Hampshire
Magazine](#)[Yankee Custom
Marketing](#)

Resources

[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Free Daily Newsletter](#)[Webcam](#)[Advertise with Us](#)[Media Relations](#)[Sell the Almanac](#)[Where to Buy](#)[Terms of Use](#)

Connect with Us

[Cookie List](#)

[Do Not Sell or Share](#)

[My Personal](#)

[Information](#)

©2025 [Yankee Publishing Inc.](#), An Employee-Owned Company

1121 Main Street | P.O. Box 520 | Dublin, NH 03444