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How to Grow a Dogwood Tree



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Planting, Growing, and Pruning Dogwoods

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: September 18, 2024



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You're doggone right ... we love dogwoods! Dogwoods are arguably the most spectacular flowering trees. A native tree with several seasons of interest, dogwoods bloom in the spring,

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leaf out in the summer, and bear red berries and foliage in the fall. Learn how to plant, grow, and care for flowering dogwoods.

About Dogwoods

Dogwoods are a group of shrubs and small trees in the genus *Cornus*. They are native to eastern North America, from Canada to Mexico, and are the state flower of North Carolina and Virginia. They are also the state tree of Virginia.

This article will focus on the famous and beautiful flowering dogwood, *Cornus florida*, which is hardy Zones 5 to 9. These small trees make excellent specimen plantings in the landscape.

They often bear short trunks, a spreading crown with multiple branches, and long-flowering pink or white flowers.

In the wild, these are understory trees that thrive below the canopy of larger trees. They enjoy the shaded environments of the forest, striving to get a bit more light. As understory trees, they prefer partial sun and some shelter from the wind. They're often found in moist environments, near rivers, but they do not like wet feet. Keep their natural habitat in mind because they don't like to be out in the open.



A beautiful specimen dogwood tree in full bloom in an Indiana state forest. Credit: Truenature

Native Americans treasured dogwood for its hardwood, which they used to make pulleys and spools; the bark and roots were also used for medicinal reasons.

When do Dogwoods Bloom?

Flowering dogwoods bloom in the spring before the leaves emerge, often in April or early May.

The pink, white, or red colors last for about two weeks in springtime. Light green leaves emerge and turn darker green in summer.

Then, leaves turn reddish in the fall, which brings showy red berries. The fruits are not poisonous but bitter and inedible to humans and beloved by birds and wildlife.

Read Next

- [The 15 Best Flowers That Bloom in Winter](#)
- [How to Grow Weigela Shrubs \(The Complete Guide\)](#)
- [How to Grow Redbud Trees](#)

PLANTING

When to Plant Dogwoods

Flowering dogwoods can be planted in either spring or fall. However, if planting in autumn, get the tree in the ground 4 to 6 weeks before the first frost to allow it time to build new roots before winter dormancy sets in.

Where to Plant Dogwoods

When selecting a site for your flowering dogwood, remember to consider the mature size of the tree (30 to 40 feet). While it will take time for your new dogwood to reach its full size, planning at planting will eliminate problems later.

Select a site with:

- Partial sun. Afternoon shade is helpful in hotter climates. An area that receives dappled sun all day is also a good choice.
- Adequate drainage with a significant amount of organic matter (as you'd find near a woodsy area).

Dogwoods like moist sites but will not do well in areas with frequent standing water.

- Slightly acidic soil.
- Easy access to the hose or other water source. Dogwoods, being understory forest trees, don't like to dry out. They'll benefit from supplemental watering during hot, dry periods, especially in the first couple of years while they are getting established. Even larger dogwoods have shallow root systems, and a droughty period can stress them more than other trees. The tree should be mulched to keep the soil moist and cool.
- Ideally, provide shelter from winds. Planting near a house, near other trees, or at the edges of your landscape will make a dogwood happiest.

How to Plant Dogwoods

Planting dogwood is just like planting other nursery stock.

- Remove any sod.
- Dig a hole the same depth as the root ball and at least twice as wide. The hole should look like a shallow bowl, not a soup can.
- Loosen the soil at the edges and bottom of the hole. Don't leave a hard, compacted edge or bottom that will be difficult for roots to penetrate (or water to drain).
- Remove the dogwood from its container and prune any circling or girdling roots. Rootbound plants will benefit from the scoring of the rootball to stimulate new growth in outward directions.
- Place and test fit the dogwood in the hole. Check for depth and ensure no roots are bent over or circling the hole. Enlarge the hole if

necessary.

- Backfill the hole with the soil you removed, ensuring the tree is kept vertical while filling. Stop when the hole is about halfway refilled and tamp the soil firmly around the roots to remove air pockets, then give it a good drink of water.

Continue filling the soil around the roots and firming it with your hands.

- Mulch around the tree, about 3-4 inches thick. Spread the mulch evenly in a circle extending 2-3 feet from the trunk. Don't let the mulch touch the trunk—keep a finger width or two separation. The final mulch job should look like a flattened donut, not a volcano.



GROWING

How to Grow Dogwoods

Dogwoods will benefit from supplemental watering during the first year and during any prolonged dry spells.

An existing in-bed irrigation system can be used if planted in a perennial bed (where they look fantastic!).

Otherwise, you may need to run the hose and provide a long, soaking drink once a week in hot, droughty weather.

Flowering dogwoods don't need to be fertilized, but if you prefer, any slow-release fertilizer blended for trees will work. Apply it in early spring, and avoid fertilizing in autumn.

How to Prune Dogwoods

Pruning dogwood is only necessary to remove dead and broken branches or to shape the tree for aesthetics.

Conduct any pruning in the dormant

season, from late fall to late winter. Of course, a storm-damaged branch can be removed at any time.

How to Propagate Dogwoods

Cornus species are cooperative to propagate from cuttings, but it takes a full year. If you'd like to try growing a new dogwood from cuttings, here's the method.

- Take softwood cuttings (June and July) of terminal twigs. Twigs should be about six inches long.
- Leave the last pair of leaves on the cutting; remove all others.
- Using a knife or your pruning shears blade, lightly scratch up the base of the twig, wounding the thin bark.
- Dip the cutting in a rooting hormone solution. 1-2% IBA works

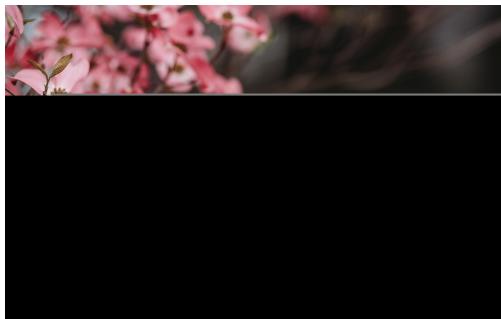
well.

- Stick the cuttings in moist media. A 1:1 mix of coir and perlite works well. Use individual small pots or large cell trays, as the cuttings should not be disturbed until they have gone through a dormant (winter) period after rooting.
- Once stuck, cover it with a plastic humidity dome or clear plastic bag tied around the pot to keep it moist. Misting will keep humidity high until cuttings are rooted.
- Place stuck and covered cuttings under supplemental lighting for faster root development. 12 hours per day of light works well.
- Rooting may take 5 to 10 weeks.

Types

There are nearly 100 cultivars of flowering dogwood.

- ‘Appalachian Joy’ is a white-flowering dogwood for those who have trouble getting dogwood to grow. It is less picky and more problem-resistant than some other varieties.
- *C. florida rubra* is a classic flowering dogwood with pink flowers and red fall foliage. ‘Cherokee Chief’ is a ruby-red flowering variety with deep burgundy fall foliage.



C. florida rubra with spring flowers. Credit: MaryShutterstock

- Dogwoods are susceptible to disease and insect problems. So, if this is your fear, look to the Rutgers University ‘Rutgan’ varieties, which are hybrids very resistant to dogwood borer and dogwood anthracnose. Most flower a little later in

the spring (a week or two)

than average.

- Stellar Pink Dogwood (*Cornus x 'Rutgan'*) is a low-branched tree with large, rounded 3 to 5-inch flowers with a profuse bloom.
- Aurora Dogwood (*Cornus x 'Rutban'*) bears velvety white flowers 3 to 4 inches in diameter. They are so dense at peak bloom that they nearly cover the foliage.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

Flowering dogwood is susceptible to disease and insect problems. Look for hybrids that are resistant to borer and anthracnose.

- Powdery Mildew
- Spot Anthracnose (caused by *Discula* fungus)
- Dogwood Borer (*Synanthedon scitula*)
- Scale Insects

The tree is deer-resistant but if you do have deer problems, see our page on deterring deer.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Interestingly, what appears as white, pink, or red flower petals are actually four leaf-like bracts under their “true” flowers which are tiny and greenish.

- When trying to identify a dogwood, look at the leaf arrangement.

Dogwoods have opposite leaves, branches, and leaf veins that curve toward the tip. The veins are usually quite prominent.

- If you have a dogwood tree, you can collect the fruit and propagate new trees from seed if you beat the birds. The seeds will need a cold-stratification period of about 3 months.
- Wood from flowering dogwood is very hard and was used to make weaving shuttles, bobbins, and mallet heads.
- Dogwoods are the state flower of Virginia and North Carolina.

SHRUBS AND TREES

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](#)

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COMMENTS

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Nancy Ferracci (not verified) 10 months

2 weeks ago

What kind of dogwood has bright red leaves
in fall?

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REPLY**The Editors** 10 months 2 weeks

ago

Hi Nancy,

There are many dogwood varieties that have beautiful red foliage in the fall. Some are more red, while others are more burgundy and purple. Flowering dogwood, Kousa dogwood, and common dogwood are some of the more well-known varieties that offer red foliage in the fall, but pagoda dogwood and gray dogwood are also good choices. It is important, since growing zones vary for varieties, to make sure that is acceptable to plant a specific variety in your area. Another dogwood, redtwig, is also worth checking out as it has vivid red stems in winter and adds a won-

derful pop of color at a time when we could all use some.

Hope this helps!

REPLY

Elvira Berry (not verified) 1 year ago

My Dogwood tree bloomed sparsely only once since planted more than 5 years ago. It has not bloomed since, and I wonder why. It is in a perfect place for an understory tree. We have big oak trees, walnut, etc. and a creek nearby. I water it in the summer whenever I water the flower garden and had fed it with compost. There are 2 Dogwood trees (pink and white) of my neighbors but they are on opposite end of the backyard. Do they need cross pollination from a similar tree? What causes it to not bloom? I'd appreciate any feedback. Thank you.

REPLY

The Editors 1 year ago

Hi Elvira,

Sorry to hear about your dogwood not flowering. Dogwoods typically grow at the edge of forests, so they spend half the day in the Sun and the other half in shade, but from your description it sounds like those are the conditions your dogwood is growing in.

If your dogwood is planted close to your lawn, which you then use fertilizers on, it could be an issue with too much nitrogen. Nitrogen is great for leaf growth, but it can cause your dogwood to not flower. If that is the case, stop using lawn fertilizer in that area of your lawn, opting instead to use a balanced fertilizer.

Drought or poor drainage can also be a factor, but since you said that you water it when you care for

your flowers it might be receiving too much water. Water logged roots can adversely affect a dogwood's growth. It is best to give it about 1 inch a week (including rainfall) for its first half dozen years.

It should also be mentioned that pruning a dogwood should only be done immediately after bloom time because pruning later in the season can remove immature buds.

And, it could also be an issue with disease or environmental stressors leading to your dogwood not blooming.

Hope this helps!

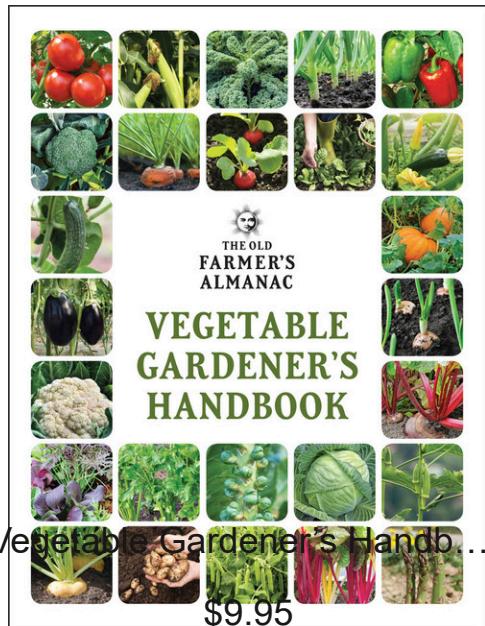
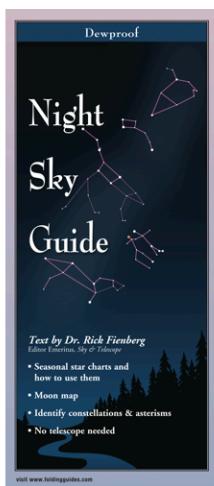
REPLY

Anne (not verified) 1 year 1 month ago

Dogwoods look lovely in woods or forests~

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