

Swida sericea, Red-Osier Dogwood, Red Twig

by Dick Fisher

Family: Cornaceae

Swida sericea, red-osier dogwood, is one of six dogwood species native to Rhode Island. It has a confusing past with sequential name changes: from *Cornus stolonifera* to *Cornus sericea* to *Swida sericea*, making it difficult to locate in gardening and botanical publications.

The other Rhode Island native dogwoods have had a similar fate and now flowering big-bracted dogwood is *Benthamidia florida*; alternate-leaved or pagoda dogwood is *Swida alternifolia* [see Cultivation Note 58]; silky dogwood, *Swida amomum*; gray dogwood, *Swida racemosa*; and bunchberry, *Chamaeperichlymenum canadense*. Silky, gray, and red-osier dogwood have a similar multiple-stemmed, shrubby habitus that perhaps is more useful in wilder, naturalized areas than in formal gardens. Flowering and pagoda dogwoods are tree-like and bunchberry is a herbaceous ground cover [see [Cultivation Note 48](#)].

Red-osier dogwood has a vast native range, from Alaska following the mountains south to Mexico and then east to Newfoundland and south to Pennsylvania. It prefers moist locations but is tolerant of higher and drier areas and so is useful as a landscape plant in Rhode Island.

The dogwoods as a group have a recognizable leaf pattern with reddish veins beginning from the central vein and curving outward toward the leaf margin where they run parallel with it almost to the tip. The leaves are opposite on the stem, two to five inches long, and smooth,



dark green on top with light green-gray undersides. In the fall they turn a deep red. (*Alternifolia* is the exception of the group with an alternate-leaved pattern.)

The multiple stems of red-osier dogwood arch outward

from the shrub base, fountain like, with some branching. The current year's growth is greenish yellow in early summer, becoming dark red in fall as the leaves are turning. The stem color persists throughout the winter after the leaves have fallen, providing interest to the winter landscape especially against a snowy backdrop. The red stems are often used for indoor floral arrangements.

Red-osier dogwoods grow quite large, 6 to 10 feet tall and 4 to 8 feet wide, and can be trimmed to maintain whatever size is appropriate for their location. Such pruning is best done in winter.

Removing the older, large stalks, which have a rough brownish bark, will encourage new, more colorful growth next year. As the historic name "*stolonifera*" suggests, these shrubs are *stoloniferous*, thus prone to root-spreading. This has not been an issue for us, but perhaps it might be if they are grown in a wetter location.

White clusters of blossoms appear in the early summer on terminal drupes. These become green berries, which turn white with a black center dot as they mature. They are quite striking. You shouldn't wait to collect seed, as the birds usually move in to get their share, often before the berries are fully ripe. In some locations a single crop of berries ripens in the late summer. In southern Rhode Island we now have a crop of berries ripen in mid to late July, followed by a second smaller crop that ripens in mid to late September. The birds usually eat the entire first crop but are not so fast to devour the second set of berries, allowing us to use the second crop as a seed source for planting.





Red-Osier Dogwood, Red Twig
(*Swida sericea*)

Swida sericea has proven to be a hardy, rapidly growing plant that can be used in conservation or landscape planting. It will tolerate full sun or light shade and moist to moderately dry soil. Spring's white creamy blooms, summer's white berries on a bush full of birds, and winter's dark red stems provide a three-season display.

Propagation

Propagation is not difficult from seed or cuttings. The seeds have a built-in dormancy requiring a cold period for germination. Although the seeds have been reported to remain viable for two to four years under refrigeration, germination seems best if they do not completely dry out. So we hand pick them when ripe and soak them in water for a few days to help remove the fleshy portion of the berry, which can inhibit germination. This

can be done by mashing with your fingers or using a hand-turned colander. The seeds are round and black, about 1 mm in diameter. Once cleaned, we keep them moist in damp peat moss in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for two to three months, then plant them in the spring. Alternatively, they can be planted in the fall in seed trays or seedbeds and left outside over the winter to provide the necessary cold period. Spring-planted seed usually germinates within a few weeks. When planted in trays the seedlings are usually ready to be moved up into one-gallon pots when they are 6 to 12 inches tall and the roots have reached the bottom of the container, usually by mid-summer.

Propagation from cuttings is reported to be easy from both summer softwood and winter hardwood cuttings. Softwood cuttings taken in June or July are placed in a peat-pearlite mix and kept moist with a mister system or by enclosing in a plastic bag or container and hand-spraying as needed. Six- to twelve-inch hardwood cuttings taken in the winter are placed directly in the soil in early spring. The use of IBA rooting hormone is reported to be optional. We have not yet tried this method as seed propagation works so well.

Availability

Native Rhode Island red-osier dogwood is available at the spring sale of the Wild Plant Society and from the Rhody Native® project of the Natural History Survey. It is carried by most nurseries, usually in the form of various cultivars..

References:

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