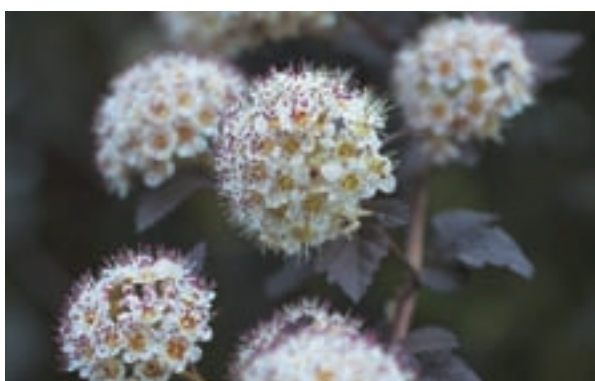




Eric Hofley / Michigan Gardener at Gee Farms

**Diabolo is an excellent companion for colorful conifers.**



Jonathon Hofley / Michigan Gardener

**Ninebarks have white to light pink flower clusters in May to midsummer.**



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**Coppertina has orange-copper leaves in the spring, turning to a rich red later in the summer.**



Jonathon Hofley / Michigan Gardener

**This full-size Diabolo ninebark looks fabulous in spring, summer and fall.**



Jonathon Hofley / Michigan Gardener

**After flowering, bright red seeds appear.**



Jonathon Hofley / Michigan Gardener

**'Darts Gold' provides golden-yellow foliage in spring.**

## plant focus

# Ninebark

When you consider plants in the rose family, many would immediately think: “Thorns!” But amazingly, many members in this family are thornless. Ninebark shares this non-prickly feature with such diverse shrubs and trees as chokeberries (*Aronia*), cotoneasters, kerrias, potentillas, quinces, spireas, crabapples, pears, peaches, mountain ashes, and cherries, just to name a few.

The name “ninebark” refers to the flaking bark, which exfoliates in “nine” layers off the stems, especially on older, woody specimens. All and all, there are 8 species of ninebarks, including several from North America. Two are of garden interest: dwarf ninebark (*Physocarpus alternans*) and common ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*).

The common ninebark, a native shrub, has an extensive range, growing from Florida to northern Quebec and the Hudson Bay and then westward to the Rocky Mountains. The word “common” in its name not only refers to ninebark’s broad growing range, but its appeal as an ornamental shrub as well.

In the past, most gardeners would not jump up and down upon seeing the common ninebark, with its ungainly suckering habit, simple deciduous, maple-like foliage, and small clusters of white flowers in the spring. At one time native Americans used the root as a medicinal aid. Some types of wildlife browse on the twigs and foliage as a last ditch food item if all others are depleted. Birds will occasionally feed on the seeds. All plant parts of ninebarks are poisonous to humans if eaten.

Not until recently did this ugly duckling become a swan, thanks to horticulturists and plant breeders doing some hybridization and selection. As newer cultivars of ninebark developed, more interest spread to gardeners and landscape designers. Improvements such as colorful foliage, graceful branching structure, prolific flowers and new flower color opened the eyes of many who once shunned the ninebark. It’s no longer just “common.”

### Growing and pruning tips

In general, ninebarks are not particular about soil pH or type and are easily adaptable unless the site is very wet. Preferring full to half-day sun, the ninebarks are drought tolerant once established and are candidates for xeriscaping. Fertilizing in the spring with a balanced tree and shrub fertilizer is recommended and a top dressing of compost yearly can intensify the foliage color in the cultivars. Pruning may be an ongoing task to achieve some sense of form and a full-body look.

Routine pruning for most ninebarks and cultivars is recommended just after flowering and no later than early August if flowers are desired next year. To overcome the “leggy” growth habit, prune back the canes about 1/3 just after flowering and branching will occur behind the cuts. As new growth sprouts with new branches, continue pinching back these new sprouts about 1 to 2 inches from the tips. This continuous pinching or pruning back will allow the shrub to become full-bodied



Jim Slezinski

### Ninebark

**Botanical name:** *Physocarpus* (fy-so-CAR-pus)

**Plant type:** Deciduous shrub

**Plant size:** 5 to 12 feet tall and wide, depending on cultivar

**Habit:** Upright, arching

**Hardiness:** Zone 3

**Flowers:** White to light pink, up to 2-inch clusters in May to midsummer

**Leaf color:** Depending on cultivar, can be burgundy, dark red, dark purple, gold, or dark green; highly ornamental

**Light:** Full to half-day sun

**Soil:** Adaptable to clay or sand with good drainage, and all pH levels from alkaline to acidic. Medium moisture; can tolerate drought conditions after established; suitable for xeriscaping.

**Uses:** Groupings; mixed perennial beds; accents or specimens; screening with larger-growing cultivars.

**Remarks:** Bright red seeds are showy and ornamental.

and more compact. Flowers will be assured for next year if this pruning technique is then discontinued by early August.

### Available varieties

Here are some cultivars to consider for your garden or landscape:

**Diabolo** (‘Monlo’) ninebark features deep, dark purple leaves in spring which usually fade later in the summer to a greenish appearance. Growing 10 to 12 feet tall and wide, the canes or stems can be pruned easily. Diabolo produces 2-inch round clusters of white to faint pinkish blooms in May and June. Later, bright red seeds appear after flowering and autumn brings on foliage colors from orange to burgundy-red. There is little winter interest in the exfoliating bark and the wiry twigs and canes leave much to be desired. If one prunes Diabolo to the ground in the fall, in the spring it will rebound with much vigor and renewed foliage color. This method of pruning may sacrifice the flowers for the next season since the blooms are produced on old wood.

**‘Dart’s Gold’** offers golden yellow foliage on a 6- to 8-foot shrub with white flowers in spring. The foliage color will fade to a lime-green later in the summer. In fall the yellow returns with hints of a bronzy-red.

**Coppertina**, a hybrid cross between ‘Dart’s Gold’ and Diabolo, boasts foliage with an orange-coppery color in the spring, later turning a rich red in the summer. Tall in stature if not pruned (8 to 10 feet), Coppertina sports pinkish-white flowers and ushers in autumn with a rich red wardrobe of leaves and bright red fruit.

**‘Center Glow’** really does glow, as its foliage emerges with a gold-yellow center surrounded by burgundy margins on each new leaf. This variegation later becomes a totally bright, deep red to purple color for the remaining growing season. Developed in 2001, it’s a patented hybrid



Harold Pellett/Landscape Plant Development Center

**‘Center Glow’** lives up to its name with its gold-yellow center surrounded by burgundy leaf edges.



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**Summer Wine** is a compact ninebark, growing 5 to 6 feet tall and wide.

“cross between Diabolo and ‘Dart’s Gold.’ Growing 8 to 10 feet tall and wide with no pruning, ‘Center Glow’ blooms white in the spring. Another bonus with this cultivar: the cut branches are marvelous in floral arrangements.

**Summer Wine** outclasses other ninebarks both in flowering contrast with the foliage and its sheer form and more compact size. This winner of a shrub was hybridized by crossing the dwarf physocarpus with Diabolo. The wine-colored leaves form a wonderful backdrop for the pink, button-like flowers during midsummer. Being shorter in stature (5 to 6 feet), the dense, arching branches can definitely add drama to any landscape. Also having superb branches to cut for floral arrangements, Summer Wine is an ideal shrub for planters for year-round enjoyment.

In terms of ninebark maintenance, keep in mind that pruning is important or, alternatively, simply know each plant’s maximum size when planting. All of these ninebark varieties can add interest in the garden as well as great color contrasts with variegated perennials and other colored-foliage shrubs.

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