



Shrub dogwoods are at the top of the list for colorful stems. 'Midwinter Fire', above, is a spectacular selection of bloodtwig dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) featuring stems washed in hues of blended red and yellow tinted with pink. 'Flaviramea', opposite page, is a yellow-stemmed selection of redosier dogwood (*C. sericea*, syn. *C. stolonifera*) that grows five to six feet high and wide.



# Stunning Stems

BY ED LYON

**F**INDING WAYS to create four-season interest is a rewarding challenge when you live, as I do, in the Midwest, where the landscape can be dominated by brown or white for nearly half the year. Here, verdant color from flower and foliage must surrender to the stripped back elegance of texture and form. Even in climes less stark in winter months, structure adds layers to the landscape. Fortunately, some woody plants possess stems that are stimulated into vibrancy with the onset of cool weather. The two power players are shrub dogwoods (*Cornus* spp.) and willows (*Salix* spp.), but a number of other options are also available. No winter landscape is complete without the vivid yellows, oranges, reds, and burgundies these plants offer. And you needn't worry that these deciduous shrubs and small trees are one-trick ponies: Many also provide interest during summer and fall with variegated or colorful foliage.

Add winter color and interest to the landscape with redbwig dogwoods, willows, and other shrubs with eye-catching stems.



In this Delaware garden designed by author and landscape designer Rick Darke, the brilliant stems of *Cornus sericea* 'Cardinal' provide a vivid contrast to the subdued tones of bluestar (*Amsonia hubrechtii*) left standing for winter interest.

## DASHING DOGWOODS

Tough, adaptable, and readily available, shrub dogwoods have long been the queen of red stems. A wide range of species and cultivars shine in winter, but there is some regional variation in adaptability and performance among the different species. In particular, some may be susceptible to fungal diseases or suffer foliage scorch from intense sunlight in warmer regions of the country. Most commonly used are tatarian dogwood (*C. alba*, Zones 2–6/7), native to Eurasia; bloodtwig dogwood (*C. sanguinea*, Zones 4–7), native to Europe; and redosier dogwood (*C. sericea*, syn. *C. stolonifera*, Zones 2–7), native to much of eastern and central North America.

“In the Mid-Atlantic, stem color at first seems an easy feat, but keep in mind the heat of our summers can cause many northern tier selections to perform poorly,” says Dan Benarcik, horticulturist at Chanticleer garden in Pennsylvania. “The best

performers for us are the redosier dogwood (*C. sericea*) cultivars.” Todd Lasseigne, former president and CEO of Tulsa Botanic Garden declares that during his tenure in Oklahoma, “We could not grow the tatarian dogwood cultivars too well due to anthracnose.” Lasseigne, who is now ex-

ecutive director of Bellingrath Gardens and Home in Alabama, says that redosier dogwood is a better performer in the Plains states. The lesson here is that if shrub dogwoods have struggled in your landscape, it’s worth trying again with a species perhaps better adapted to your growing climate.

## PRUNING AND CARE

Because younger stems tend to have the brightest coloration, shrubs with stunning stems benefit from annual “rejuvenation” pruning. This is a fairly simple process of cutting roughly one-third of the oldest stems to the ground, which forces the plant to flush out vigorous new stems the next growing season. Some species will also benefit from occasional renewal pruning, where all the stems are cut down entirely to within a few inches of the ground. They will flush out thicker, fuller, and shorter the following spring.

Both rejuvenation and renewal pruning should be done in winter, while these deciduous shrubs are dormant. A side benefit of this pruning may be that you can use some of the cut stems, along with other fall and winter plant material, to create attractive porch pot displays (for more on how to design porch pots, view “Seasonal Porch Pots,” published in the September/October 2019 issue of *The American Gardener*).

—E.L.



The young twigs of *Salix alba* var. *vitellina* turn yellow when temperatures drop, but those of this cultivar, 'Britzensis', commonly called coral bark willow, turn bright red.

## WONDERFUL WILLOWS

If shrubby dogwoods are the queen of colored stems, then willows are a worthy consort. Willows are generally categorized as trees, but this huge genus ranges from the lofty weeping willow to dwarf arctic forms growing prone to the ground only inches high. There are shrub forms, but tree species may be coppiced—pruned back to the base—regularly to

produce a shrublike form that's better adapted to modest home landscapes. You may also find these in nurseries trained as a single-stem tree forms.

One of the best willows in my estimation—and one also recommended by Lasseigne—is white or coral bark willow (*S. alba* var. *vitellina* 'Britzensis', Zones 4–8). Its young, slender twigs turn brilliant red to red-orange in cool temperatures.

## Sources

**Greenwood Nursery**, McMinnville, TN. [www.greenwoodnursery.com](http://www.greenwoodnursery.com).  
**Monrovia**, Azusa, CA. [www.monrovia.com](http://www.monrovia.com). (Monrovia is a wholesale nursery, retail sources for its plants can be found on its website.)  
**Sooner Plant Farm**, Park Hill, OK. [www.soonerplantfarm.com](http://www.soonerplantfarm.com).

## Resources

**Dirr's Encyclopedia of Trees & Shrubs** by Michael A. Dirr. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2011.  
**The New Sunset Western Plant Book** edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel. Sunset, Menlo Park, CA, 2012.

Coppicing this tree produces some of the most vibrantly colored stems in the winter landscape and keeps it to a manageable size. Lasseigne has been equally impressed with 'Chermesina' in Oklahoma with its brilliant scarlet stems. Benarcik lauds the hybrid 'Flame' and the popular 'Golden Curls' selection of Chinese willow (*S. matsudana*, Zones 5–8) that features vivid golden-green, twisted branches. Another Chinese willow selection is 'Tortuosa', sometimes called corkscrew willow. All of these lend themselves to annual coppicing to control their size and maintain vibrantly colored twigs.

## MORE PLANTS WITH STRIKING STEMS

One of the more unusual and intriguing shrubs for twisted stems best appreciated in fresh fallen snow is contorted European filbert (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta', Zones 4–8), also known as Harry Lauder's walking stick. Few plants create such dramatic silhouettes when the foliage drops. The foliage is contorted as well. Cultivars 'Red Dragon' and 'Red Majestic' have added red-purple foliage to the visual mix. This shrub is durable for most areas of the country; however, it is a Japanese beetle magnet. In the Northwest, another filbert is the choice of Janine Anderson, founder and principal of North Beach Landscapes in Port Townsend, Oregon. "There's something transcendent about the long pinkish purple catkins dangling from the bare stems of *C. maxima* 'Atropurpurea Super-



ba' (Zones 4–8) in the Winter Garden at Seattle's Washington Park Arboretum," she says. Although technically flowers rather than stems, the flowers elevate this purple filbert to deserve inclusion on a list of plants with stunning stems.

Until *Rhus typhina* 'Bailtiger' (Tiger Eyes®) exploded on the scene, sumacs (*Rhus* spp.) flew under the radar with their brief but spectacular fall foliage. However, many gardeners recognize that the coarse fuzzy stems of Tiger Eyes® can be pruned into interesting forms. "Tiger Eyes® sumac (Zones 4–8) is a favorite of mine," says Carol Heffernan, founding principal of Heffernan Landscape Design in Chicago, Illinois. "I like them alone, as a specimen, or in a little colony that adds a striking presence. It can easily step into the role of a little tree. The delicate, feathery foliage really lights up a garden, and the fall color is always dependably stunning."

**Top left:** The twisted branches of Harry Lauder's walking stick are best seen in winter after the leaves have dropped. **Bottom left:** The young branches of Tiger Eyes sumac, shown here in fall color, are covered with reddish fuzz.

**Opposite:** The red stems of 'Sango Kaku' Japanese maple are especially striking in spring when contrasted against its emerging new leaves.



Maples (*Acer* spp.) are another example of common trees with small-scale options that fit home landscapes, including some offering exceptional stem color and texture. Benarcik lauds Japanese maple (*A. palmatum*, Zones 6–8) cultivar 'Sango Kaku' for its chartreuse foliage and stems, which he says are "a proven warm red color so useful in our regional winter landscapes." Although Japanese maples may not be hardy in the ground for those in Zone 5 and colder, they adapt well to containers that can be wheeled into an unheated garage that doesn't drop below zero in the winter.

I hope this article inspires you to consider a new aesthetic focusing on color, texture, and form that will add interest to your garden and enrich the senses every season. 🍂

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