



"Flowering Dogwood New Hampshire's Big Tree for May"

By Anne Krantz, NH Big Tree Team

The elegant simplicity of the clear white flowers of native dogwood trees (*Cornus florida*) that grow along forest edges and wooded roadsides in southern New Hampshire, brighten up dark woodland settings to create stunning natural scenery in May. The long lasting blossoms, that open just as the leaves begin to emerge, are technically four bracts or bud scales that unfold to reveal the cluster of real flowers in the center.

The state champion dogwood grows along a roadside in Amherst: 30 feet tall with 31 inch trunk circumference. The former owner of this champion tree, renowned gardener Wally Alberts and her husband Bob, discovered a group of native dogwood trees growing in the woods on their forested property. To enjoy these beautiful trees, Bob successfully moved a few from the rear of the property to the front, including the champion tree. They located it next to a stone wall near the road and Wally created a fabulous rock garden underneath. This was perfect for the tree which has obviously thrived as surrounding trees grew up providing afternoon shade.

Bob also planted two of his trees at the Concord Country Club about 15 years ago. I just checked with Don Smith on grounds maintenance, who remembered them being planted. They are now about 15 and 20 feet tall and doing fine. Club members can look for them between the sixth and seventh hole and on the eighth hole. Bob has since died so this is a lovely remembrance of him.

I also obtained two of their young dogwood trees. At the time, the fear of the devastating anthracnose disease, *Discula destructive*, limited interest in planting the trees, because it was killing large stands of the trees further south. It begins as leaf spots but can move from the leaves to the inner bark, where it kills the living cambium tissue and then the trees. But I gambled that these progeny of native dogwood trees would be tough and hardy.

Since they were found growing on a rocky hillside, under tall oaks with dappled sun, I tried to plant them in similar settings. I knew they are classified as 'understory' trees and they would like some shade. In the wild they are found along the edge of woods, or along wooded roadsides where they can peek out to get a little sun. I tried two different locations. The front yard tree, planted where it would be visible from the street, is struggling. Although under tall trees to the north, it gets hit by strong afternoon sun, and by August it wilts late in the day. The backyard tree on a hillside, neither gets drowned by spring rains, nor gets cooked in the strong summer sun because it is shaded in the late afternoon. It is loaded with beautiful blossoms, while the one in

front has exactly 17 blossoms.

I had the pleasure of visiting Washington, D.C., one April when the dogwood was in full bloom in the older residential areas. These mature trees were huge and very wide, and I was astonished at the density of the blossoms on boughs laden with flowers. Most yards had both pink and white trees creating a beautiful contrast. Here on the northern edge of their natural range we are equally thrilled with a more sparse and lacy look of fewer blossoms on trees that are set against a backdrop of woods rather than buildings.

Their distinctive opposite branching pattern, along with its small form (seldom over 40 feet), and unique leaves with parallel veins that come to the tip of the pointed leaves makes them easy to identify even when not in flower. In addition to being a spring beauty, dogwood is striking in fall with clusters of bright red berries quickly eaten by wildlife because of their high fat content. Its rich red fall color is a late season bonus.

Dogwoods have very shallow roots that need consistent moisture, which explains their aversion to direct summer sun that draws moisture from the trees too rapidly. They do best when growing in humus but well-drained soils, as they don't like too much water either. In residential settings mulching under the tree canopy helps retain moisture. Don't pile mulch against the trunk because that promotes rot.

Any nick to the thin bark can provide an entry spot for the deadly fungus spores, and mulch helps to keep lawnmowers away. The stress of a lawn setting increases their vulnerability to borers who attack weakened trees. Diseases also attack weak trees, and the deadly anthracnose likes soggy, wet foliage. A bit of sun is important to keep the leaves dry to discourage fungus diseases that thrive in extended wet spells. The Dogwood anthracnose fungus reproduces rapidly in rainy, cool spring weather, but a quick warm-up in spring will stop it. Powdery mildew is a later fungal problem that causes the foliage to become discolored and distorted.

Although impossible to imagine, dogwoods were cut for the wood, mostly in the south. Historically, the wood had valuable and very unique applications. It is very hard and smooth so was crafted to make shuttles for use in the textile industry because they did not wear the thread. It was also good for spools.

Because the wood is very heavy and doesn't flatten when pounded, it was perfect for mallets, wedges and the tines of rakes. It has a high resistance to sudden shock, so it was ideal for making wood golf club. This quality also made it good for tool handles, and it was perfect for chisel handles. It made good wheel hubs, and was used for various turnery items made on a lathe. But long before these uses, Native Americans had discovered their medical properties, and that a red dye could be extracted from its root bark to dye blankets, feathers and belts.

Apparently in the past in the South, dogwood was used as a cut flower which threatened native stands of the tree. Fortunately this is no longer done thanks to the educational efforts of wild flower preservation organizations.

Unless you are golfing at the Concord County Club or driving back roads in the southern towns,

you are most likely to see a dogwood growing in yards as an ornamental. If you notice one that seems to be larger than the state champion, or one located in a county other than Hillsborough, contact the NH Big Tree State Coordinator, Carolyn Page, carolyn_page@hotmail.com, phone: 664-2934, who will pass the information on to the appropriate county coordinator.

Also visit the NH Big Tree web site at www.nhbigtrees.org for the complete list of champion Big Trees. UNH Cooperative Extension and the NH Division of Forests and Lands sponsor the NH Big Tree program in cooperation with the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests.

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