

## Plant of the Month

***Cornus sericea*** – red osier dogwood

**Family:** *Cornaceae*, dogwood family

**Habit:** Shrubs, mostly 1.5 – 4 m tall, younger branches red to yellow in color; leaves in opposite arrangement, lance to egg-shaped, 1-12 cm long, surface can be smooth or sparsely hairy; flowers arranged in a flat to convex topped cluster, individual flowers small and white; fruit comprised of white flesh surrounding a hard pit (drupe); flowers May – August.



**Habitat:** Gulches, ravines, riparian corridors, and wetland margins. 5,000-9,800 ft. *Cornus sericea* can be found on County properties such as Twin Lakes, Walden Ponds, and Betasso.

*Cornus sericea* is a versatile and highly adaptable plant. While it prefers habitats where the soil remains moist – wetlands, bogs, riparian areas – it is sometimes found in drier open forests and, once established, is drought-tolerant. The bright red stems add a pop of color in drab winter months, making dogwood cultivars a popular landscaping choice. It is also very hardy – in one experiment, *C. sericea* clones were collected from a site that experienced minimum temperatures ranging from -66 to 3°F. In a lab, these clones were able to acclimate to temperatures not seen in nature: - 130°F!

The indigenous community found many uses for dogwood, from medicine to dye to hunting tools. Different parts of the plant are used to make tea to break fevers, treat coughs, or relieve sore muscles. The inner bark is processed and incorporated into a smoking mixture for use during ceremonies. The flexible stems are good for weaving, and some tribes use them to make baskets, fish traps, and altars.

The fruit serves as an important food source for birds in the fall and winter, and the dense multi-stemmed growth of dogwood creates cover for small birds and mammals. Moose, elk, and deer will browse *C. sericea*, but it is likely a backup when less desirable forage is available. Its primary means of spread is through stoloniferous roots and seeds dispersed by birds that eat the fruit.

What does *Cornus sericea* have to do with dogs? Well, nothing. Dag is an Old English word for skewer or dagger. The tough yet flexible twigs make good skewers and thus were referred to as dagwood. The word changed because of linguistic drift, when a word's spelling and pronunciation shift over time. The “a” sound was lost in certain dialects and was pronounced as an “o” sound. Eventually, dag was replaced with dog and the name stuck.



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