



VIBURNUM (*Viburnum*) Genus Overview

Author, plantsman and professor Michael Dirr has written that "a garden without a viburnum is akin to life without music and art." We at the UDBG wholeheartedly agree. Members of this cosmopolitan genus are found throughout the collection and contribute the beauty, drama and intrigue so admired by Dr. Dirr. Over 150 species of *Viburnum* are found across the northern hemisphere and typically exist as multi-stemmed shrubs, though a few species can attain small tree status. The diverse genus features species with deciduous, evergreen or semi-evergreen foliage, all of which can be observed at the UDBG. Though *Viburnum* flowers are nearly universally white in color, some varieties are deep pink in bud and offer an extended period of springtime interest. As described below, some offer sweetly scented, ephemeral blooms while others feature an odor much less attractive to the olfactory receptors of passersby. An added benefit of many species is a handsome fruit display each autumn. Like hollies (*Ilex* spp.), viburnums produce fleshy, single-seeded fruits known as drupes. Beginning in early summer they begin their journey to mature shades of blue, black or a fascinating spectrum of pink to red. Some cultivars, like *Viburnum dilatatum* 'Michael Dodge', even feature an autumnal display of golden-yellow drupes among the foliage. However, fall interest rarely stops at ornamental fruit. Many *Viburnum* species offer dazzling fall color that ranges from bright yellow or orange to deep shades of burgundy or purple. The UDBG currently features over 200 individual viburnums, representing 70 different species or cultivars. Most of these are found at the UDBG's northwestern corner; adjacent to Exploration of the UDBG's extensive collection will surely reveal a unique viburnum for a wide variety of horticultural tastes or applications.

1: *Viburnum acerifolium*

Mapleleaf Viburnum, *Viburnum acerifolium*, is so-named for its unique, maple-like leaves that mimic those of the genus *Acer*. It is one of the most common understory viburnums in Delaware and is a prominent component of the Lepidoptera Trail and the UDBG's surrounding collection of native plants. Never vigorous or brash, *V. acerifolium* typically resides in shady woods as a rather open, leggy shrub measuring up to 6 feet tall. White, flat-topped floral clusters (cymes) appear during May and lead to the production of deep blue-black drupes by late summer. In fact, this species is distinctive from other "maple lookalike" viburnums by its blue fruit. Similar species, namely the American Cranberrybush Viburnum (*V. trilobum*) and the imported European Cranberrybush (*V. opulus*) feature bright red mature drupes. Mapleleaf viburnum extends its ornamental season with a reliably handsome display of orange-red to burgundy fall color.

2: *Viburnum carlesii*

Koreanspice Viburnum, *V. carlesii*, provides one of the most intoxicating aromas found on the springtime breeze. Introduced over 100 years ago from its native Korea and Japan, it has enjoyed decades of top-billing among ornamental shrubs. Impressive cold hardiness (to USDA Zone 4) and a relative lack of diseases and insect pests has opened the door to widespread cultivation in most of Europe and Eastern North America. Cherished primarily for the white, spicy-sweet flowers that cover the plant each April, the species has been incorporated into several areas of the UDBG. Two specimens can be found alongside the north side of the UD Creamery, where their wonderful scent coincides with the first ice cream cravings of spring. *V. carlesii* can eventually become a large, rounded shrub measuring up to 10 feet tall and wide at maturity. However, it can be easily controlled with judicious pruning immediately after flowering. Also cultivated at the UDBG is *V. carlesii* 'Compactum', a less ambitious grower maturing at about 6 feet tall by 6 feet wide. This smaller variety has also been used in a grouping near the entrance to Fischer Greenhouse while another specimen flowers amidst the lush, emerging perennials of the Herbaceous Garden. *Viburnum carlesii* has been used in breeding to produce a number of popular Viburnum hybrids. One example is *V. ×juddi*—a heat-tolerant, deliciously fragrant clone created by crossing *V. carlesii* with the similar yet obscure Bitchiu Viburnum (*V. bitchiuensis*). Both of these can be observed in UDBG's extensive collection and aid in students' understanding of popular ornamental plants and their origins.

3: *Viburnum cylindricum*

Viburnum cylindricum, Tubeflower Viburnum, is a virtually unknown species that has become a prominent feature of Townsend Hall's northern courtyard. Hailing from Southeast Asia, *V. cylindricum* features peculiarly fused, tube-like flower petals with conspicuous light purple anthers. This unique floral shape led to its conveniently descriptive specific epithet and common name. Mid spring brings a barrage of these creamy white flowers clusters that nearly engulf the fresh, bright green foliage. While not fragrant in the same sense as *V. carlesii*, this species emits an attention-grabbing pungence that demands pause and reflection. A grouping of several specimens in the Townsend environment has permitted ample cross-pollination, which leads to a respectable fruit set that matures from green to shades of pink to glossy black by fall. *V. cylindricum* is typically evergreen, but Newark's Polar Vortex Winter of 2013/14 effectively demoted the plant to semi-evergreen status. However, new growth has been vigorous and complete. The UDBG's finest specimen (05-18*1) has reached just over 7 feet tall and 8 feet wide at just under 10 years of age. Although Tubeflower Viburnum has little chance of entering the horticultural mainstream, it is a valuable member of the UDBG's collection of lesser-known woody plants.

4: *Viburnum obovatum*

Viburnum obovatum, commonly known as Small Viburnum, is sometimes referred to as Walter's Viburnum in parts of its range. It occurs across the Southeastern United States from South Carolina south to Florida and west to Alabama. Despite a home range far south of Delaware, this species has proven perfectly hardy at the UDBG and deserves wider cultivation as far north as southern New England (USDA Zone 6). Small Viburnum's name is likely in reference to its tiny evergreen leaves that measure only $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 inches long. The leaves are a rich, glossy green throughout the growing season and take on a purplish hue during the winter months. Also small are the numerous white flower clusters that adorn the plant as the leaves emerge in early spring.

The plant's typical growth habit is anything but small. In fact, the UDBG's 20-year-old specimen (92-76*1) along Roger Martin Lane now measures a sprawling 8 feet tall by 12 feet wide. Fortunately, wider horticultural acceptance of this species lies with several dapper cultivars selected for compactness and density. The most common of these is *V. obovatum* 'Reifler's Dwarf', which has already made ornamental inroads with nurseries as far north as southern Virginia. 'Reifler's Dwarf' is far more restrained in growth rate than "straight" *V. obovatum* and offers the same petite evergreen foliage and prodigious flowers but matures at just 4-6 feet tall and wide. A small specimen of this cultivar (14-129*1) can be found near the walkway approaching Fischer Greenhouse. Similar in appearance but smaller yet are a pair of dainty cultivars, 'Mrs. Schiller's Delight' and 'Whorled Class'. These impressively dense clones look more like dwarf Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*) than *Viburnum* and open the door to use of *V. obovatum* as a low hedge or foundation plant. Future efforts at the UDBG will involve acquiring these cultivars and assessing their usefulness to local landscapes.

5: *Viburnum utile*

Viburnum utile, Service Viburnum, is a handsome evergreen viburnum in its own right. However, its vital role as a genetic workhorse illustrates its historic value to the breeding of a number of fantastic landscape viburnums. Students observing the low, rounded habit and slightly twisted, glossy foliage of UDBG's finest specimen (88-6*1) can draw a quick comparison to several plants bred and introduced by the United States National Arboretum during the second half of the 20th Century. These include ornamental mainstays like 'Chesapeake', 'Conoy', and 'Eskimo'. In fact, several of the *V. utile* in the UDBG's collection were obtained directly from the U.S. National Arboretum, directly linking them to germplasm used in Dr. Don Egolf's original breeding program. The eminently useful Service Viburnum is also responsible for producing other time-tested taxa like *V. xburkwoodii* (Burkwood Viburnum) and the super-charged evergreen hybrid, *V. 'Pragense'* (Prague Viburnum). The small, slightly fragrant flowers dot the foliage each May and, when fertilized, develop into dark blue-black drupes by late summer. When considering its long list of all-star progeny, the educational value of displaying *V. utile* is undeniable. The species is another Chinese transplant, which clearly emphasizes the importance of both exotic and native plants in breeding ornamental plants adapted to the realities of modern landscapes.

Works Cited

Dirr, Michael. 2009. *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*. 6th ed. Stipes Publishing LLC, Champaign, IL

**Please reference *Viburnum* Featured Selections Map pdf
for locations of these viburnums at UDBG.**