THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Showy blossoms of southern arrowwood viburnum. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Aiming for Native Species

Arrowwood is a species to target if you're looking for one that will do well in your yard.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

There is a native shrub in our yard that appears at will and is really quite beautiful; horticulturalists describe it as having plenty of "seasonal interest." Its common name is southern arrowwood viburnum; the scientific name is *viburnum dentatum*.

Arrowwood's leaves are a deep green growing opposite one another on a multi-stemmed sticky base. In the spring its round

green buds look almost like berries. In summer they open into white showy flowers arranged in flat-topped clusters, which are one to four-and-a-half inches across. These turn to blue-black drupes that ripen in the fall. The leaves' colors have seasonal changes as well – yellow, glossy red, or even reddish purple. On our property they are normally yellow in the autumn.

This southern arrowwood viburnum will soon flower. Note that an insect has eaten holes the leaves. The plant is an important host plant for moths and butterflies. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Arrowwood can grow up to 15′ tall. Note the multi-stemmed base. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

People often ask me which native plants are showy or would do well in their yards. Arrowwood is a good choice and will even make an attractive hedge.

You may recall we have spoken about black walnuts and their juglone that prevents most plants from growing near them. This is described as allelopathic, when a chemical interaction of one plant inhibits the growth of

others nearby. Arrowwood tolerates juglone and also does well in clay soils. People often grow a black walnut to keep other vegetation at bay, but if you are looking to add something tolerant of juglone, arrowwood is a good choice.

Arrowwood blooms from May to early June. The berries appear August-November, provide a food source to birds, but are not good for people.

Straight stems begin at the base of the plant and as it gets taller they arch over, seemingly from the weight of the leaves. Branching is sparse; younger branches are hairy and older ones are smooth. The leaves are heart-shaped.

Arrowwood is native to the eastern United States and common in New Jersey. In the Pine Barrens it tends to stay along waterways, and it thrives in alluvial bottomland woods on moist soils and wooded slopes. It was interesting to learn that Missouri's Department of Conservation notes, "Although it is widespread in eastern North America, it is critically imperiled and a species of conservation concern in Missouri." The Center for Plant Conservation lists it as apparently secure in DE, GA, MA, MD, NJ, NY, OH, PA, and RI, while in New Jersey they also list it as rare in its distribution. So it

maybe plentiful where it is found but it doesn't exist widely.

Stands of arrowwood can produce dense cover for birds; thickets make good nesting sites. Naturalist Pat Sutton lists at least a dozen birds that use its fruit. The Arbor Day Foundation and EcoBeneficial lists butterflies and moths that take advantage of it as Baltimore checkerspot, azure, question mark, red admiral, and eastern butterflies, noting that green marvel pink prominent, azalea sphinx, and clearwing hummingbird moths use the leaves in their larval form.

If you want a variety of butterflies you need host plants, not simply nectar sources. Arrowwood provides both food for caterpillars and nectar for bees and butterflies.

Mammals also devour the fruit – e.g. deer, rabbits, mice, skunk, and squirrels. Deer and beaver will also eat the leaves. Species of birds that especially like the drupes are robins, cardinals, cedar waxwing, ruffed grouse, and wild turkey.

The shrub tends to grow six to 15 feet tall. Each year I trim ours back in a number of spots where I don't want it to be robust because there is a walking path adjacent to it. And each year it comes back hardier and

beyond my reach. Then I remind myself that its presence insures that I see many hummingbird clearwings in August.

Almost every year I get a call from someone who has seen the hummingbird clearwing moth and tells me, “Gee, I saw the tiniest little hummingbird in my yard.” After discussion ensues, I explain that what they have seen is a member of the sphinx moth family. “Wow, cool!”

The hummingbird clearwing moth’s caterpillars use the leaves of arrowwood as a food source. This moth is feeding on nectar from phlox. Clearwings are critical pollinators. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

The popular name “arrowwood” derives from one of two sources and possibly both. First

the leaves are pointy and arrow-shaped, and second the strong straight branches that shoot up from its roots are said to have been used by Native Americans to make arrow shafts.

Beyond arrows, the Ojibwa used the plant's bark in a smoking mixture called "kinnikinnick." A few ethnobotany sources discussed additional applications related to women's reproductive systems. The Iroquois used a decoction of twigs for conception and swelling of legs after birth. References to menstrual cramps were also found in some literature – and other viburnums were utilized in native medical treatments.

Often people ask if the berries are inedible and/or poisonous. I found mixed advice in this regard. The berries mostly consist of seed and Plants for a Future described them as sweet, but conversely gave them a 2 out of 5 edibility rating. Interestingly the berries of another member of the family, cranberry viburnum, are edible but must be both ripe and cooked or else they are toxic to some extent. Browsing for food in the wild is best left to knowledgeable people. My advice is – unless you are starving leave the berries for the birds.

Southern arrowwood viburnum berries or drupes are eaten by birds and mammals. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

If you wanted to establish southern arrowwood on your property the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service gives advice on its propagation, in an online planting guide.

Sources

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