

# The Garden



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PLANT PROFILE

Viburnum plicatum

With pleasing shapes and good spring and autumn foliage, these handsome deciduous shrubs flower in May. Here are some in an RHS Plant Trial, which has been extended into this year

Author: Maurice Foster VMH, an honorary member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

Viburnums are a useful genus of flowering shrubs with deciduous and evergreen species, many of which grace our gardens with their summer and winter blooms. Among the best and most shapely of deciduous viburnums, usually flowering in May in the UK, is *Viburnum plicatum*. Native to China, Japan and Taiwan, it occurs in two distinct forms: one with a round, sterile, densely packed 'snowball' flower, known as forma (f.) *plicatum*. The other is the 'wild' form, f. *tomentosum*, with a flat-topped 'lacecap' inflorescence, a disc of tiny fertile flowers surrounded by a prominent ring of showy, sterile ray flowers, rather like a lacecap hydrangea. Long cultivated in Japan and China, *V. plicatum* was first introduced to Britain in 1846 in its snowball form from a Chinese garden by the resourceful Robert Fortune. The wild lacecap form arrived from Japan in 1865.

The prolific display of flowers in May that characterises both the snowball and lacecap forms is set against beautifully veined and pleated foliage, often with a coppery hue in spring and vivid red/bronze to purple colours in autumn. The fertile lacecaps also provide prominent displays of red fruits, eventually turning black.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of many cultivars is the layered habit of growth, with tiers of horizontal branches, each laced with two rows of beautifully presented flowers that often sweep down to the ground. In the USA they are known as 'doublefile' viburnums. In winter, the sweeping, tiered form, bejewelled by hoar frost, can be bewitchingly beautiful.

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Viburnums as entered in the RHS Plant Trial, extended to 2021. Names and synonyms to be ratified.

- 1 *Viburnum plicatum* f. *plicatum* 'Rosace' (white flowerhead; possibly syn. 'Pink Sensation')
- 2 *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Dart's Red Robin'
- 3 *V. plicatum* f. *plicatum* 'Chyverton' (possibly syn. 'Grandiflorum')
- 4 *V. plicatum* f. *plicatum* 'Popcorn' AGM
- 5 *V. plicatum* f. *plicatum* 'Pink Sensation' (pink flowerhead; possibly syn. 'Rosace')
- 6 *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Cascade' AGM
- 7 *V. plicatum* f. *plicatum*
- 8 *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* Killimanjaro Sunrise ('JWW5')
- 9 *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Elizabeth Bullivant'
- 10 *V. plicatum* f. *plicatum* 'Mary Milton'
- 11 *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Molly Schroeder'
- 12 *V. plicatum* 'Janny'

Photographed 22 May 2020, RHS, Tim Sandall





Bullivant' ❶, which flowers late and is also prolific in fruit.

***Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Rowallane'** Also taller than wide, with a neat bushy habit to about 2m (6½ft), this is one of the most free-flowering white cultivars. Individual inflorescences are smaller than most, but the ray flowers are of typical size. Fruits freely ***Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Cascade'** AGM ❷ A seedling of 'Rowallane' from the Netherlands, it bears large ray flowers cascading down horizontal branches on a plant to 2m (6½ft). As effective in its copious red fruit as it is in flower; has good wine-red autumn colour.

***Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Igloo'** USA raised, this was named after its compact, mounded habit to 2m (6½ft), making it good for small gardens. Its pure white ray flowers are perhaps the biggest of the lacecaps.

***Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Shasta'** With a few additional ray florets scattered through the inflorescence, 'Shasta' is particularly heavily 'laced', offering white domed flowers on a floriferous, vigorous, spreading plant to 2m (6½ft) across. It flowers well in shade. Introduced by the US National Arboretum in 1979.

***Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Nanum Semperflorens'** (syn. 'Watanabe') This selection flowers freely in May, followed by a continuous scattering of a few white flowers through summer. Flowerheads are smaller than most, produced on a neat, dense shrub up to 2m (6½ft). Fruit is also effective.

The many cultivars of *Viburnum plicatum* have much to offer UK gardeners: they are hardy, easy-to-grow shrubs with poise and elegance. Suited to most soil types, they can embellish any garden, large or small, formal or informal, for many weeks with beautiful flowers, attractively pleated foliage, fine overall form, and (in the fertile lacecap cultivars at least) good displays of fruit.

## Growing *Viburnum plicatum*

*Viburnum plicatum* are easy-to-grow, medium-sized early summer-flowering shrubs.

**Family**  
Adoxaceae.

**Introduction**  
In the front rank of hardy, highly effective flowering shrubs, suitable for planting almost anywhere in the UK. Outstanding combination of foliage, flower, fruit and form.

**In the garden**  
Plant in mixed and shrub borders and woodland gardens in sun or part shade.

**Growing requirements**  
Any well-drained to average moist soils; unfussy as to pH. Avoid frost pockets; mulch plants annually. Prune only to restrict size where necessary.

**RHS hardiness rating**  
H5: hardy in most places throughout the UK even in severe winters (as cold as -15 to -10°C/5 to 14°F).

**Propagation**  
Easy to root from semi-ripe cuttings or by layering.

**Pests and diseases**  
Few major problems.



Many cultivars develop vivid autumn colours (left) of wine red, bronze or even purple shades.

Named for its striking fruit, *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Dart's Red Robin' (below) bears white lacecap flowers tinged pale pink.



Having performed well in the RHS Garden Wisley plant trial, and less prone to reverting to white than some other pinks, *V. plicatum* f. *plicatum* 'Mary Milton' may be 'pick of the pink' snowball forms.



In another use of the horizontals of *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Mariesii' AGM, here they contrast boldly with a yew hedge behind and a foreground of clipped box balls.

## RHS Plant Trial of *Viburnum plicatum* 2013–2021

The trial of 41 cultivar entries on Portsmouth Field (below) at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey, was extended an extra year into 2021 due to Covid-19, so visitors can still see the range of cultivars. Plants will be finally assessed for quality of flower, foliage, fruit and form, and recommended or not for the Award of Garden Merit at the end of the season. The trial was planted in 2013 but extended because of problems with the initial plantings, which were grafted onto *Viburnum opulus* rootstocks. In the second year it became evident there was a severe compatibility problem between scion and understock for most entries (lack of growth, small and discoloured leaves and a general want of health and vigour).

For the trial to continue, lower branches were 'layered' (pegged down and covered with soil), so that plants could be grown on their own roots. In 2015 two years were added to the trial, later extended by another year.

