

PLANT PROFILE

CORNUS

A recent RHS Plant Trial has revealed dogwood selections that are a delight in winter for their vivid stem colour, and others that bring joy to summer with their colourful foliage

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Dogwoods (Cornus) have long been loved by gardeners for their dramatic winter stem colours that create dazzling effects, especially planted en masse or beside water. Increasingly, they are enjoyed in smaller gardens, adding easy colour to winter borders or even short-term container displays.

Three species of dogwood are primarily grown for winter-stem colour. Native to Siberia, northern China and Korea, *Cornus alba* grows in thickets, especially in damp places such as streambanks. Its North American counterpart, *C. sericea*, is often found in river valleys and wetlands, from Newfoundland to Alaska and south to California. Native to Europe including southern and central England, *C. sanguinea* grows in hedgerows and scrub limestone. Over the years, selections have been made with improved stem colour, ideal for growing as a copice to ensure brightest young growth, some are valued for their colourful foliage.

RHS Plant Trial

To find the best garden selections, an RHS Trial took place at RHS Garden Hyde Hall, the entries planted in the Winter Garden. Plants were assessed between 2018 and 2020 with AGMs ratified by the RHS Woody Plant Committee in 2021. Some *C. sanguinea* cultivars were planted late, so the final assessment of these will take place in 2022. In all, 62 entries were judged, nine cultivars earning an Award of Garden Merit.



The dazzling stems of *Cornus sanguinea* Amy's Winter Orange underplanted with variegated Hedera (ivy) and green Ophiopogon.



The RHS Plant Trial of *Cornus* judged plants in the Winter Garden at RHS Garden Hyde Hall (above).
Appealing *Cornus sericea* 'Bud's Yellow' (right) glows in winter.



Cornus for winter stems

The following dogwoods have an RHS hardiness rating of H7 (colder than -20°C/-4°F) unless stated. Approximate size assumes plants are coppiced annually. Some have fine autumn leaf tints.

AGM selections from the trial

- 1** *Cornus sanguinea* 'Amy's Winter Orange' AGM: selection with bright red coppiced stems that glow in the winter sun, not too vigorous. Selection introduced by Dutch nurseryman Andre van Nijmegen. Size: 1.4m high x 1.5m (4½ x 5ft). AGM reconfirmed. RHS hardiness rating H5 (-15 to -10°C/5 to 14°F).
- 2** *C. sericea* 'Bud's Yellow' AGM: similar to *C. sericea* 'Flaviramea' with greenish-yellow stems; this selection is more vigorous and marginally brighter in the landscape – I think it has the edge. Great with red-stemmed selections. Size: 1.5 x 1.2m (5 x 4ft).
- 3** *C. sericea* 'Flaviramea' AGM: selection popular in cultivation for 120 years, with bright greenish-yellow stems; excellent with red-stemmed cultivars. Size: 1.4 x 1.2m (4½ x 4ft). AGM retained.

Other interesting selections with bright stem colour

- 4** *C. alba* Baron Rouge ('Minibar'): selection with bright red stems but it was noticed in the trial that after a couple of years of coppicing two shoot colours emerged, so possibly unstable. Size: 1.6 x 1.6m (5¼ x 5¼ft).
- 5** *C. sericea* 'Isanti': compact selection with deep red stems and brick-red autumn leaf tints. Size: 1.25 x 1.5m (4 x 5ft).
- 6** *C. sanguinea* 'Majic Flame': has yellow stems from the base of the shoots graduating to red in the upper half, making a superb contrast. It has nice amber-yellow autumn leaf tints. Another from Andre van Nijmegen. Size: 1.3 x 1.4m (4¼ x 4½ft).
- 7** *C. sanguinea* 'Sifa': selection with yellow-orange winter stems and yellow autumn leaf tints. Size: 1.5 x 1.4m (5 x 4½ft).
- 8** *C. sericea* 'Cardinal': plant with attractive salmon-coloured stems, quite vigorous and tall so good for the back of a border. Also has good autumn foliage tints. Size: 1.7 x 1.6m (5½ x 5¼ft).
- 9** *C. sericea* 'Coral Red': selection with dark red stems and good warm, pinkish red autumn leaf colour. Size: 1.5 x 1.4m (5 x 4½ft).

Still a worthwhile favourite?

Although its AGM was rescinded due to variability between entries in the trial, judges were impressed by popular *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' plants growing nearby at Hyde Hall. A mini trial of this cultivar with plants from a few sources is being arranged for the future. >>

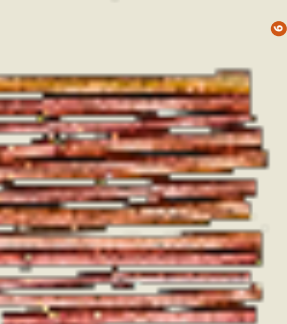
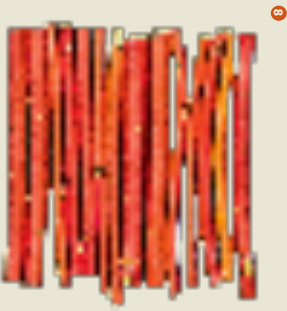
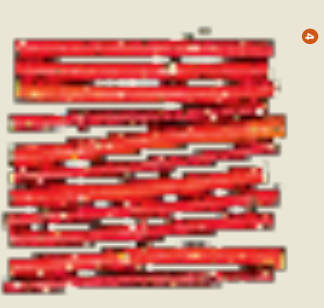
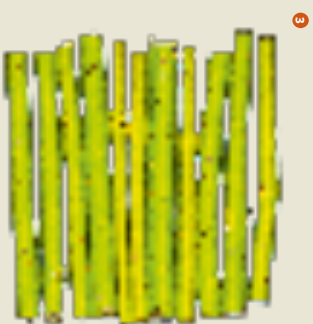
How to prune for the best stem colour

The best way to grow dogwoods for stem colour is by annual coppicing in the spring, just after bud burst, where stems are cut to 2-3cm (¾-1¼in) above the ground. One-year-old wood is the most vivid, and the strong growth that results from annual coppicing will have good colour from the base of the shoot to the tip. If a plant is left without being pruned, annual growth gets shorter year after year, and older wood gets less colourful.

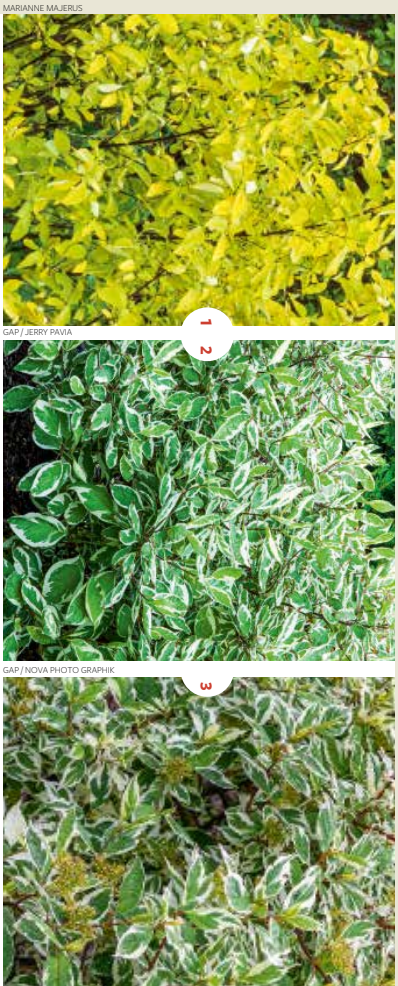
Do not cut stems straight after planting, but wait until plants are established; at least a year for *C. alba* and *C. sericea* cultivars, two years for *C. sanguinea* cultivars. Plants of *C. sanguinea* are rather prone to late frost damage, so wait to coppice until frost risk has passed then cut stems hard down to delay tender regrowth.



Cut *Cornus* stems 2-3cm (¾-1¼in) above ground.



With thanks to RHS Gardens Hyde Hall, 28th January 2021 photographed; RHS / Tim Sandall



MARIANNE MAJERUS

GAP / JERRY PAVIA

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GAP / MARTIN HUGHES-JONES

JOHN FIELDING

GAP / CAROLE DRAKE

Cornus for summer foliage

The dogwoods below are great for summer foliage: some have good stem colour. Plants with variegated leaves are prone to reverting to green if annual coppicing is carried out: only prune if plants get too large. Size assumes plants are unpruned. All have an RHS hardiness rating of H7.

AGM selections from the trial

- 1** *C. alba* 'Aurea' AGM: one of the best yellow-foliage plants. It does not scorch in full sun, and can be coppiced, although its red stems are less bright than some. Brings fine autumn colour as leaves fall. Size: 2.5 x 2m (8 x 6½ft). AGM reconfirmed.
- 2** *C. alba* 'Ivory' 'Haló' ('Baihaló') AGM: variegated selection with leaves that are attractively margined with creamy white; young shoots dark red in winter. Good autumn foliage tints. Size: 2 x 2m (6½ x 6½ft).
- 3** *C. alba* 'Sibirica Variegata' AGM: this plant has variegated leaves that feature a broad creamy white margin. It has good autumn colour and dark red stems. Not too vigorous. White fruits in late summer. Size: 2 x 3m (6½ x 10ft). AGM reconfirmed.

Old favourites fail to make the grade

A pair of well-known selections with variegated foliage had AGMs rescinded after the trial: *C. alba* 'Elegantissima' was found to be too variable in the trade, and *C. alba* 'Spaetthilf' is susceptible to reverting even if never pruned.

- 4** *C. sericea* 'Hedgegrows Gold' AGM: vigorous variegated selection with leaves that have a yellow margin when young, ageing creamy white. Good autumn colour. Yellow-green stems with reddish tips. Size: 3 x 2.5m (10 x 8ft). AGM retained.
- 5** *C. sericea* 'Kelsey's Gold' ('Rosco') AGM: dwarf selection with bright yellow leaves that are bronze-tinted when young. Green-yellow winter stems with red tips. Size: 0.6 x 1m (2 x 3ft).
- 6** *C. sericea* 'White Gold' AGM: variegated selection, the leaves with a white margin and green-yellow winter stems. A compact grower good for a small garden. Size: 1.5 x 1m (5 x 3ft).

Cornus in the garden

Selections grown for summer foliage are versatile shrubs useful for creating contrast, bringing long-lasting and dramatic colour to plantings. Use them in mixed borders, to brighten lightly shaded corners or even in exotic schemes where their bright foliage can make a useful foil to flowers and architectural shapes.

Plant dogwoods grown for winter-stem colour in groups of three or five to increase the impact, if you have room, and spacing plants 1–2m (3¼–6½ft) apart, depending on vigour. Choose an open, south-facing spot. Stem colour is enhanced if plants are exposed to winter sun, as can be seen by comparing colour on the sunny side to the shady side of a stem. Cold temperatures boost colour, which improves as the plant is slowly exposed to more cold. When planting them remember that you need space to access your plants to coppice them in spring.

Winter stems of dogwoods associate well with similar plants grown for stems: willows such as *Salix alba* 'Golden Ness' or *S. alba* var. *virellina* 'Yelverton', white-stemmed *Rubus coccoburrinus* 'Goldenvale' and *R. thibeticus* or golden *Acer negundo* 'Winter Lightning'. Herbaceous perennials such as hellebores and evergreen euphorbas sit well with yellow-stemmed dogwoods, while winter-flowering bulbs are ideal for underplanting – snowdrops and winter aconites combining perfectly with red-stemmed dogwoods.

Whether you only have room for one dogwood or can plant many more, they help really brighten winter days. **○**

Gardeners' notes

Over/ivm
Dogwoods for colourful winter stems or impressive summer and autumn foliage.
Family
Cornaceae.

Species and cultivars

Mostly selections of *Cornus alba*, *C. sanguinea* and *C. sericea*.

In the garden

Plant in an open, sunny site for the best stem colour; wind shelter is beneficial.



MARIANNE MAJERUS

Dogwood stems form part of a surprisingly colourful display with white *Betula* (birch), ferns and *Epimedium*.



MARTIN HUGHES-JONES

Red-stemmed dogwood with snowdrops.



RICHARD BLOOM

Golden-leaved *Cornus alba* 'Aurea' amid a sea of blue *Geranium*.

Selections grown for stems are best coppiced regularly.

Propagation

Easy from hardwood cuttings taken in autumn and winter.

Growing requirements

Plants thrive on acid or alkaline soil, be it sandy, loamy or heavy clay. Add organic matter and mulch to help with moisture retention. Tolerant of wet conditions, but excessive waterlogging in winter can

cause root death. Feed in spring after planting with general-purpose fertiliser or organic feed to stimulate growth. Water in dry spells to aid establishment.

RHS hardiness rating

Most rated H7, a few H5. Plant *C. sanguinea* cultivars after frost risk – they are prone to damage if not established.

Availability

Many selections mentioned here can be found online at rhs.org.uk/findaplant