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Successful Landscaping

## Red-twig Dogwood in The Landscape

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So many of my clients hear me recommend *Cornus sericea* or *alba*



*Native Cornus sericea in summertime still retains red branches if in full sun situation.*



*This is what we love about red-twig dogwood in the wintertime! Cornus sericea 'Midwinter Fire'.*

for their landscape design. It fits into our area's climate situation quite nicely. *Cornus sericea* is native here (see next photo down). But I rarely recommend the native plants for use in ornamental landscapes because they can get very large and don't have THE most beautiful bark like the named cultivars (which have been bred to be smaller and have THE most beautiful bark).

Native *Cornus sericea* in summertime still retains red branches if in full sun situation.

For me, using a named cultivar of a native is close enough for most ornamental landscape uses. If you want truly native, you must NOT use plants with a name in quote marks after the Latin name—that quoted name denotes it is a variation of the species in question. When nature creates such a variety, it is called a *variety* when man breeds the variety, it is called a *cultivar*. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with using cultivars. In the case of the *Cornus* genus, they are generally smaller, tidier, more beautiful, requiring less overall maintenance, and will still perform, more or less, the same as the native.

### Design with Red-twig Dogwood

My favorite design using red-twig dogwood is to place several good-sized rocks or boulders around the shrub's base and plant winter bulbs in the gaps between the shrub and the rocks. Use winter bulbs like *Cyclamen coum* and early spring bulbs like *Crocus*, *Galanthus*, *Muscari*, *Narcissus*, and later spring bulbs such as *Tulipa*.

See photo with this paragraph. Though this is in a container, it gives a good idea what a larger garden could look like—and the shrub is a yellow-twig (*Cornus sericea 'Flaviramea'*), rather than red. This arrangement will create a lovely late-winter/early-spring display before the dogwood leaves out in spring.



*I like to plant early spring bulbs below shrubs that are coppiced.*

## Pruning Red-twig Dogwoods

I recommend pruning red-twig dogwood around late winter or early spring. It depends on what bulbs you plant below and if you're going to coppice (see next section below) the shrub or prune it in thirds. If you're pruning in thirds, that means you're only removing 1/3 of the branches each year (cutting the stems to the ground for caning habit plants). Pruning like this creates a larger shrub, and enables it to flower. Coppicing always prohibits flowers for shrub dogwoods. But these shrubs generally don't have very significant flowers. You'll have to decide what look is right for you. Flowers and larger shrub. Or no flowers and smaller shrub.

If you're coppicing your shrub dogwood, timing depends on what bulbs you've planted at its feet. If they are all short things, you can wait until it breaks bud. If they are taller things and your shrub is very dense, you may want/need to prune it before those tall bulbs bloom otherwise, the new dogwood's new foliage will cover up your pretty taller bulb flowers.

Some shrub dogwoods break bud very early. If you particularly like the way early and short bulb flowers and foliage look with the dogwood's colorful branches coming out through them, postpone pruning until you see the dogwood's buds begin to swell.

At the bottom of this post I'll make a pruning book recommendation.

## Coppice Red-twig Dogwoods

Cutting some shrubs to the ground each year encourages fresh, colorful, new growth. This pruning technique is called *coppicing* (when branches are cut at close to ground level). It's called *pollarding* if you cut off the branches up higher, letting there be a distinct trunk. Red-twig dogwood looks goofy *pollarded*, always *coppice*.

The practice of *coppicing* and *pollarding* started centuries ago by basket-makers—at least that is the story was told. They needed pliable branches of a certain diameter which were only found on the first years growth—the soft wood—of such plants as willow (*Salix*) and shrub dogwood (*Cornus*). They noticed that these plants had very colorful bark on this new (1-year-old or less), soft wood. So they employed these pruning practices so they'd have a continued supply of the type of branches they needed to make their baskets. This was the beginning of forest/woodland management.

My clients know that I love to recommend red-twig dogwood shrubs (*Cornus alba* or *sericea*) because of their colorful bark display during the winter. Most *Cornus* cultivars grow quite large, and after the first year the colorful bark begins to turn gray. So I recommend coppicing these plants so they will form

a tidy, dome shape that will be the same size each year (because the shrub only grows for one year before the entire plant is again cut back to the ground).

The plants in the photo above have been coppiced, but what you are seeing is the end of one year's growth—it is winter, just before the branches are all cut to the ground again. This grove of red-twig dogwood are possibly planted for the purpose of harvesting one-year-old branches. I think you can get the idea of how planting these wonderful shrubs in groupings will add colorful impact to the winter garden.

The [Royal Horticulture Society](#) has a good description of [why and how to coppice](#). Some pruning guides say to prune red-twig dogwoods in *thirds*—that is to remove to the ground 1/3 of all the branches every year. This is a very typical method of pruning *caning* shrubs. And this is fine for red-twig dogwood, if you have the space for the shrub to attain it's full size over 3 years. One of the reasons for *coppicing* is to keep the shrub **SMALLER** than how large it would be in 3 (or more) years—and a tidier shape as well.



*Mass planting of red-twig dogwood. See how you get more color the more branches that are near each other. Coppicing creates MORE branches, and that is why we prune this particular shrub in this manner.*

## Pruning Book Recommendation

I highly recommend [pruning according to Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning](#). It is the reference I most often recommend—particularly for beginners. It is perfect after-care for my own demonstrations of horticulturally-correct pruning. I love it so much, I have the e-book on my phone!

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