FLOWERING DOGWOOD

By ELIZABETH MURRAY
Dept. of Biology, Univ. of Virginia
Charlottesville

Illustrated by Lucile Walton

VIRGINIA was surprisingly late among the states in choosing her state flower. The campaign to provide an emblematic flower for each state was started at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Many states made their selections shortly thereafter, but the question did not come up in the Virginia legislature until the second decade of this century. At that time a great many people wanted the Virginia creeper, because its name, of course, immediately brings the Old Dominion to mind. However, someone objected that Virginians were not climbers, while Virginia creeper was, and in the deadlock that followed, advocates of the flowering dogwood offered it as a compromise. As it was almost everybody's second choice anyway, it was finally adopted. Today it is also the state flower of North Carolina (they used to have a daisy), and the Pacific dogwood, Cornus nuttallii, is the province flower of British Columbia.

The Dogwood family, Cornaceae, is not a very large one, around a dozen genera and about a hundred species. It is widespread in North America and temperate zones of Asia. There are some members of the family in the tropics, and in Europe it is represented only by the genus Cornus. The family contains mostly woody shrubs and small trees, occasionally herbs, nearly all with opposite leaves. Flowers tend to be small and insignificant with their parts arranged in twos and fours.

Flowering dogwood is technically something of a misnomer, since the parts which we admire so much as "flowers" are actually four large petaloid bracts. These start as the covering of the flower bud which develops in late summer and persists through the winter. The following spring the bracts indulge in a second-growth period. They enlarge tremendously, become very petal-like and gradually open out, forming what is loosely referred to as the "flower," with the real flowers looking like a bunch of stamens at the center. The bracts are greenish as they first open and then become pure white. The weather-beaten winter portion of the bract is borne at the apex of the new bit and as it wears off, a very characteristic notch is formed, with a dark scar at the base. One author dramatically calls this scar "an insignia of service, the sign of work well done," referring to the job of protecting the bud during the winter.

The flowers are followed by clusters of berries—technically drupes—which turn a brilliant red in the fall and are relished by many birds. The opposite leaves are simple, ovate, with a tapering, pointed tip, and a rounded base with a short leaf stalk or petiole. Although in the more northerly parts of its range, Cornus florida sometimes occurs just as a shrub, in our area it grows as a tree which may be as much as forty feet high. It grows very slowly and the branches are twisted and irregular, giving even young trees a rather gnarled appearance.

Most people admire the form of the dogwood, but there are old legends in which this shape is meted out as a punishment. A chief with four beautiful daughters announced that he would barter them for the richest furs he could get. To chastise him for such greed, the gods turned him into a low, twisted tree, the four beautiful bracts representing his four daughters. Another legend tells that the dogwood used to be a very tall, straight tree until the Cross was made from its wood, whereupon it was turned into a low, tortured tree. The bracts here represent the Cross, with the notches as nail holes and the dark stain the blood from Christ's hands and feet.

Cornus florida is found, mainly in acid woods, throughout the eastern states from Maine to Florida and west to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas. While it is usually white, there is a pink form, var. rubra, which is occasionally found in nature, and which is heavily encouraged under cultivation.

The Pacific dogwood, Cornus nuttallii, is a larger tree 40' to 50' high with even more showy bracts. A specimen of this and also of the band-tailed pigeon was sent to the ornithologist Audubon by Thomas Nuttall. Audubon gave the dogwood the specific name of nuttallii after his botanist colleague, and included it in his well-known picture of the band-tailed pigeon.

Cornus sanguinea, one of the commoner European species, is known as the cornel, and C. suecica as the
dwarf cornel. The former grows on calcareous soils in England and other parts of Europe and has shiny dark red branches from which it gets its specific name. Virgil refers to javelins made of myrtle and cornel wood which pierced the body of Polydorus, king of Thebes, when he was slain by his father. The Greeks apparently had to instigate a special feast at Lacedaemonia to appease Apollo because he became so angry when they cut down the cornel trees on Mount Ida, presumably to make their javelins. Romulus, when he wanted to extend the boundaries of Rome, hurled his spear as far as he could to mark the extension permitted by the gods. It stuck into the ground on Palatine Hill, and from the cornel-wood handle grew a fine tree said to foreshadow the greatness and strength of the Roman state.

The wood of dogwood is indeed strong. In addition to classical spears, it has been used to make goads for animals, hence the name “prickle-timber woode.” Our flowering dogwood is used for bearings, tool handles, engravers’ blocks and shuttles for looms. Charcoal made from the wood is excellent for gunpowder.

Extract from dogwood bark has been used medicinally in the place of quinine. The bitter principal which is obtained can be used to combat malarial fever. There are some reports that it is effective as a general tonic and assists a failing appetite. A reddish-tan dye can also be obtained from the bark.

Washing mangy dogs in extract of dogwood is said to be an effective treatment, and the common name could have come from this property. In Europe species of Cornus are sometimes called Hound’s berry. A more likely explanation for the name is that it comes from the word dagge or dagger because of the wood’s usefulness in making spears. The generic name cornus comes from the Latin word for horn, and florida means ‘flowering’ rather than referring to the state of Florda. The name ‘skewerwood’ is also sometimes used, since the hard wood is excellent for butchers’ skewers.

With these many uses in both past and present, perhaps the main function of the flowering dogwood today is to provide us with a mighty pretty tree in springtime. By the end of March the bracts are starting to open, although they are usually still greenish at this time. In April the “flowers” reach their peak of whiteness and beauty. If the weather does not become too hot too quickly, they may continue blooming through the end of May and into the beginning of June.