EUONYMUS

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In nature, certain colors can mix magnificently, whereas if we put them together artificially, they would clash terribly. The fruits of Euonymus are a wonderful sight in the fall, yet not many interior decorators would choose to mix so closely the purplish-magenta of the Euonymus fruit with the brilliant scarlet of the seed-coverings inside.

The Celastraceae or Staff-tree family is a small family of shrubs which in eastern America contains only the Staff-tree itself, Celastrus, Cliff-green or Pachistima, and Euonymus. There are many species of Euonymus throughout the world. The European E. europeus is known colloquially as bonnet de prêtre or bonnet carré because its four-square fruits resemble a priest’s biretta. In England the appearance of the greenish-white four-petaled flowers stimulated the old wives’ tale that if the flowers were scanty, all would be well, but if there was a profusion of blossom, then plague would sweep the land. Concoctions of the flowers were used to ward off the plague, but actually only caused violent nausea or purging. The name is connected with this property. Possibly the bush was called after Euonym, Mother of the Furies, who led her band of serpent-wreathed avengers against any escapee of justice and lashed him with poisonous scorpion stings (the fruit of Euonymus is poisonous). Or the name may come from the Greek eu meaning good and anoma, a name, meaning of good repute but in this case applied derogatively actually implying not of good repute at all. Theophrastus, one of Plato’s pupils who was responsible for a great many plant names, warns us of the dire effects of Euonymus on stock, particularly goats.

In our area there are two main species of Euonymus E. atropurpureus, the Burning-bush or Wahoo, and E. americanus, Strawberry-bush or Bursting-heart. Strawberry bush is a slender shrub which may be upright or straggling over the ground. The leaves are opposite, rather thick, oval-shaped and almost sessile, that is, with practically no stalk. The flowers are not very conspicuous, greenish-purple, borne at the tips of the branches and in the leaf axils. The fruit is a warty, purple capsule which splits open in the early fall to expose the scarlet outer covering of the seeds.

Burning-bush is a larger shrub, sometimes a small tree growing up to 20 feet high. The leaves are not as thick as those of the previous species; they are slightly hairy underneath and they do have a stalk. The flowers are purple and also rather small and insignificant. Unlike the strawberry-bush, the fruit is a smooth capsule, but it does have the brilliant Euonymus coloring, purplish magenta outside splitting open in the same way as E. americanus to reveal the seeds inside with their showy scarlet coats. Euonymus atropurpureus is a northerly species occurring from Ontario west to the Rockies and south to Virginia, Alabama and Oklahoma. E. americanus is found more in the South, from Florida up to Pennsylvania.

The Iroquois Indians are reputedly responsible for the name “burning-bush.” Their legend tells of the fire dragon who had to live in water lest he set fire to the world. One day an Indian fishing in the lake got his hook entangled in the dragon’s scales. The dragon furiously bit through the line and flew off. As he sped away, the hook fell out with a drop of dragon’s blood on it which set fire to the bush where it landed. The gods put out the fire before it spread too badly, but they could not extinguish it completely, and every year it is rekindled briefly during the fall as the fruits of the Euonymus bush.

The Dakota Indians gave Euonymus the name “wahoo,” which is their word for arrowwood, and they did in fact make arrows from it. The tree has good hard wood for making any sharp-pointed instruments. In the South, the mountaineers still call E. americanus “skewer wood,” referring to its use in making butchers’ skewers. The wood is close-grained and burns slowly to produce excellent artist’s charcoal. The European species, E. europaeus, is called Spindle-tree because the wood was used to make the spindles of looms.

An oil made from the seeds of the European spindle-tree used to be given, as the books delicately put it, “for the destruction of vermin in hair.” A preparation of the bark of American Euonymus has been used medicinally in this country. It was originally considered to be effective in the treatment of heart disease. More recently it was only employed as a purgative in cases of chronic constipation and sluggish livers. Nowadays it is no longer prescribed.