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# Viburnum popular shrub with an odd name

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## Garden Tales

Viburnum has always seemed like an odd-sounding name to me. Yet these are common shrubs, both growing in the wild and planted as very popular landscape ornamentals. Viburnums have opposite leaves, and flowers in relatively large clusters (corymbs) that are white and sometimes pink in color. A number of species are blooming in Delaware right now.

The native viburnum species in Delaware are *Viburnum acerifolium*, *V. dentatum*, *V. prunifolium*, and *V. nudum*. These grow as deciduous (non-evergreen) shrubs in woods or swamps, both on the coastal plain and in the piedmont. They can be planted as beautiful ornamental shrubs, in sun to partial shade. Two other native species, *V. cassinoides* and *V. rafinesquianum*, have not been seen in the wild in Delaware for at least 20 years and are thus considered "historical" in our state.

*Viburnum acerifolium* is maple-leaf viburnum, well-named for its lobed leaf shape. The scientific name for maple is *Acer*, so "acerifolium" means "maple leaf". Its native habitat is woods, and its fruits are eaten by songbirds, gamebirds, and mammals.

*Viburnum dentatum*, arrow-wood, grows in moist woods and swamps. It has straight, long shoots, and is said to have formerly been used to make arrows. The scientific name refers to the prominently

toothed leaf edges ("dentate").

The scientific name of *Viburnum prunifolium* means "plum leaf", and its leaves do resemble plum leaves with small teeth. Its common name is blackhaw, referring to the blue-black fruits. It grows in rich woods and thickets, and along woods edges.

*Viburnum nudum* has the common name possum-haw viburnum. Its leaf edges are smooth (no teeth), and it grows in swamps. The fruits of these last three species are all eaten by turkey, cedar waxwing, brown thrasher, and some mammals.

There are about 150-175 viburnum species in the world, a number of which are important ornamental shrubs. Some of these non-natives have strikingly fragrant flowers, such as Korean spice viburnum (*Viburnum carlesii*), and the clove-scented Burkwood viburnum (*V. burkwoodii*). The European cranberry-bush, *V. opulus*, has large, showy sterile flowers round the edges of the flower cluster, which help attract pollinators. The well-named Chinese snowball viburnum, *V. macrocephalum* ('Sterile'), has large round white flower clusters ("macrocephalum" means "large head").

Although some viburnum fruits can be eaten by humans, other species are mildly toxic. The fruits are blue, black, red, or purple, and contain one seed. Until recently, viburnums were placed in the honeysuckle



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The European cranberry-bush, *Viburnum opulus*, has a flower cluster edged by large, showy sterile flowers.

family (Caprifoliaceae), but are now in the Adoxaceae.

Since there are so many different viburnum species, people may not readily recognize these very commonly planted shrubs, but they are well worth knowing for their flowers, hardy growth, fall foliage, fruits, and sometimes fragrance.

*Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, herbarium educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.*