

Flowering dogwood

(*Cornus florida*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

When in bloom, Flowering dogwood is arguably one of Florida's most beautiful flowering trees. Though dormant in winter, the tree comes alive in early spring. Before leaves emerge, a bounty of showy white to pinkish blooms cover the crown. From late summer to fall, its abundant fruit provides food for a variety of birds and small mammals. Flowering dogwood occurs naturally along the edges of mesic hardwood forests and pinelands throughout North and much of Central Florida.

On first sight, flowers appear to have four large white petals with greenish-yellow centers. In fact, those "petals" are bracts and the centers are a cluster of tiny flowers, each with minute greenish-yellow bracts. The large bracts are typically white but may be pinkish to almost red. They are broadly ovate with a distinctly notched apex. Flowers are born in clusters on the tips of each branch. Leaves are simple and ovate with entire margins and veins that curve toward the apex. Leaf arrangement is opposite. Fruits are large bright red drupes born in clusters of two to 10. The tree is multi-trunked and multi-branched with a spreading crown.

Historically, dogwood (*Cornus* spp.) has had many uses: American Civil War soldiers made a tea from the bark to treat pain and fever, and a poultice from the leaves to cover open wounds. Native Americans made a red dye from the roots and used the bark and roots to treat malaria. The dense wood has been used for many artisan items, including walking canes, arrows and wine presses.

Family: Cornaceae

Native range: Panhandle, peninsula south to Orange, Polk and Manatee counties (excluding most east coast counties)

To see where natural populations of Flowering dogwood have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 7–9

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Moderately moist to dry, well-drained acidic soils

Exposure: Partial shade

Growth habit: 20–30' tall, crown spreading to 15–20' wide

Propagation: Cuttings, seed. Cuttings generally require a mist system to keep the plants moist. Dormant seed should be cold-stratified for three to four months before sowing.

Garden tips: In the right conditions, Flowering dogwood is easy to grow and relatively maintenance free. However, it does not tolerate alkaline soils or prolonged exposure to intense heat. If planting in full sun, additional irrigation may be necessary. Dogwoods are susceptible to an anthracnose fungus and dogwood borers. The best defense is to plant in settings that do not stress the plant. An ideal setting is the understory of large oaks or other deciduous trees. Be sure to source locally, as plants from northern states do not bloom or do well in Florida.

Flowering dogwood plants are occasionally available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.



Photo by Stacey Matrazzo