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Cornus Florida: A Winter Look at the 2018 WOY

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Cornus florida: A winter look at the 2018 WOY

By vote of the Virginia Native Plant Society Board of Directors, Flowering Dogwood, *Cornus florida*, will be the 2018 Virginia Native Plant Society Wildflower of the Year. One hopes that all Virginians are able to identify Flowering Dogwood because, after all, it is our state flower (and state tree). This is an appropriate time to summarize how to recognize *Cornus florida* in winter. First, as I like to tell my students, “Dogwood can be recognized by its distinctive bark.” After a brief pause for laughter (or groans), I explain that the bark of mature trees consists of a densely tessellated pattern of small plates, a pattern of scales finer than that of any other local tree (Figure 1).

But this bark pattern is not manifest until the tree is relatively old. Younger specimens can also be recognized in winter by their distinctive flower buds; flower buds terminate clusters of upturned branchlets, and are roughly spherical with a small central point. Viewed closely, the four bud scales that cover these flower buds will be distinguished. And, if one watches Flowering Dogwood bud break closely, one will learn that these four bud scales first

diverge slightly, then, by a process of intercalary growth (i.e., expansion from their bases) they enlarge to form the characteristic four bracts that many mistake for petals.

Finally, overall branch patterns of *Cornus florida* are distinctive. Each lateral branch grows more or less horizontally for a limited distance before curving upward; subsequently, these upturned branch tips undergo only incremental growth each season. Nevertheless, further lateral extension of the branch does occur, but only by stimulation of lateral buds below the upturned slow-growing tips. The process repeats over and over, creating branch systems characterized by successive horizontal segments interrupted periodically by upturned branchlet tips. This branch pattern is best seen in winter when the basic architecture is not obscured by leaves. But it is worth noting in closing that it is this distinctive branch pattern that so effectively displays the early spring bract-bordered flower clusters that are the crowning glory of our 2018 Wildflower of the Year.

—W. John Hayden, Botany Chair



Figure 1. *Cornus florida*, bark of a mature tree. Figure 2. *Cornus florida*, next spring's flower buds in late fall, just before leaf drop. (John Hayden photos)