



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*  
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# Flowering Dogwood

(*Cornus florida*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Throughout Alabama and most of the Eastern United States, dogwood flowers in our landscapes are beautiful promises of spring. The American native flowering dogwood, *Cornus florida*, is one of the most widely planted and most beloved of the world's trees. To a mischievous little "woodsie," many years ago in Montgomery County, clouds of lovely white dogwood flowers in the forest were a clear sign that it was finally time to go barefoot, and the bream were moving onto their beds!

A small, irregularly shaped understory species, dogwood is most often found in partial shade, beneath larger trees. The leaves are deciduous, opposite, to about 5 inches long, 2 inches wide; entire, or with minute marginal teeth. Leaf shape is variable, almost round to lanceolate, with abruptly sharp-pointed tips. The flowers are small and yellowish, surrounded by four large, showy white or pink bracts which resemble petals, appearing in early spring with the leaves. Dogwood fruits are bright red, oval, berry-like drupes, containing a pit with two seeds. These pretty red fruits provide an important winter food source for birds and squirrels. The bark is dark gray-brown, thick, broken into small squarish plates. *Cornus florida* is a larval host for spring azure butterflies.

Dogwoods occur in Europe as well as North America. The wood is quite hard and strong, yet flexible. In England the cornel, as dogwood is called, was valued in ancient and medieval times for weaponry such as bows, arrows, and lance shafts. The

common name, in fact, is derived from the old English word *dagge*, a dagger or sharp-pointed object.

Indian uses of dogwood include a red dye made from the roots to color quills and basketry. They made poultices from the bark to treat sores, and dogwood bark teas were brewed to treat diarrhea and fevers. It was a wood of choice among the North American Indians, along with osage-orange and hickory, for making bows. Dogwood is too small to be of much value as lumber, but its hardness and durability have made it useful for tool handles, loom parts, spindles, and wheel hubs.

Smoke was widely believed by North American Indians to be mystical – a way to communicate with the spirit world – and pipe smoking was an important element of their ceremonial lives. The leaves and inner barks of many plants, including, sumac, willow, cherry, and tobacco were smoked in calumets, as Indian pipes were often called. The inner bark of dogwood was a frequent ingredient in these Indian smoking mixtures.

Among the European settlers and their herbal doctors, dogwood enjoyed a reputation as a "febrifuge," a treatment for fevers that was equaled by very few native plants. Some sources even placed the bark above quinine as an anti-malarial. During the Civil War, the Confederate government placed ads in newspapers, offering to purchase dogwood bark. *Cornus florida* was listed as an "official" medical preparation in the *United States Pharmacopeia* from 1820 to 1894.

Flowering dogwood is the state flower of Virginia and North Carolina, and the official state tree of Missouri. The Alabama State Champion *Cornus florida* is a giant – 70 inches in circumference, 38 feet tall – located in Cleburne County.☞

