Types of Dogwoods for Our Area

Stan Rosenthal is an Extension Agent with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County.

As spring revs up, we begin to focus on one of our best flowering plants, the eastern dogwood. No doubt this is one of our most popular trees. As one can easily see when they are in flower, there are many of them in our neighborhoods.

How well your dogwood flowers is generally dictated by two things. The environment in which it is grown and what genes it inherited from past generations. We can manage the environment to keep a tree as healthy as possible by doing things like recycling the leaves in mulch beds under the trees.

But how can we manage heredity? We can do that by selecting the dogwood trees that have the characteristics we like the most, such as large or numerous flowers. Just like the corn we eat has been selected over generations so that it gives us the characteristics we want, trees are often manipulated this way also.

Horticulturists have spent much time selecting the dogwoods with the best characteristics. Such a selection is referred to as a cultivar. The most popular or promising cultivars are then reproduced and sold in nurseries to us gardeners.

When selecting a cultivar you will need to now if it will do well in our climate. Eastern dogwood grows over much of eastern North America but some cultivars are for more northerly climates and don’t do well here. A good but unfortunate example is the pink-flowering cultivars which grow poorly in USDA hardiness zones 8 and 9. We are in zone 8.

A cultivar that has somewhat pinkish flowers and that does flower well here some years is the Junior Miss dogwood. Its scientific name is *Cornus florida 'Junior Miss'*. *Cornus florida* is the scientific name of dogwood. *Cornus* is the Latin name for Dogwood. *Florida* translates as "flowering", referring to the showy flower bracts. The 'Junior Miss' is a large flowering form of dogwood, with the outer portions of the bract pink grading to whitish in the center. Like all dogwoods, this tree does best in partial shade.

The Cloud 9 dogwood, *Cornus florida 'Cloud 9'*, is an exceptional white-flowering cultivar that works in our area. Its white flowers have oval overlapping bracts, giving the blossoms a pleasing disc-like effect. This cultivar is also noted for profusely borne flowers when the tree is very young. Its habit of growth is spreading.

The Weavers white dogwood, *Cornus florida 'Weaver's White'*, is a cultivar well adapted to USDA hardiness
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zones 8 and 9. It was discovered in Florida. It can be trained with one central trunk or as a picturesque multi-trunked tree. Its white flowers are very large. The fall color is red to maroon. The fruits are bright red. Branches on the lower half of the crown grow horizontally, those in the upper half are more upright. In time, this can lend a strikingly horizontal impact to the landscape, particularly if some branches are thinned to open up the crown. Lower branches left on the trunk will droop to the ground, creating a wonderful landscape feature.

A study conducted at Auburn University from May 1996 to March 1998 observed differences in 38 dogwoods of 4 main types: flowering dogwood, giant dogwood, kousa dogwood, and kousa x flowering dogwood hybrids. I am not sure where these dogwoods were tested but we can assume it was in Alabama. The climate in south Alabama has a similar climate to ours but in north Alabama it can be quite cooler than here, and so we have to consider this research only preliminary. In this study researchers concluded that flowering dogwood selections are better performers in full sun of the Southeast than giant dogwood, kousa dogwood, and kousa x flowering dogwood hybrids based on plant mortality.

In the Auburn study, of the flowering dogwood selections with white bracts and green foliage, 'Barton', 'Cloud 9', 'Fragrant Cloud', 'Ozark Spring', and 'Welch Bay Beauty' were the best performers while 'Autumn Gold' and 'Wonderberry' were the worst. 'Cherokee Brave', 'Cherokee Chief', and 'Pink Beauty', and f. rubra were the best performers with red or pink bracts and green foliage. Among the selection with variegated foliage, 'First Lady' was the only selection that performed well, while 'Cherokee Sunset' and 'Rainbow' performed poorly.

As you can see there are many dogwood cultivars, but we don’t have much research on how many of these do under conditions in north Florida. If anyone has tried a named cultivar here (besides Barton, Cloud 9, or Weaver), and has had a number of years of success I would be interested in finding out what you have found. Just drop me an e-mail at stanr@mail.co.leon.fl.us

Whichever dogwood cultivar you pick, make sure to mulch it well as dogwood roots are very sensitive to heat. Apply the mulch 2-4 inches deep and spread it out at least as far as the crown. Finally, don’t pile the mulch up deep against the trunk.

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