

## Notable Natives

### Blackhaw Viburnum



*Blackhaw viburnum. All viburnum photos by Meredith Tucker.*

We may love our neighbors, but we love our privacy as well. If “good fences make good neighbors,” consider natural fencing using blackhaw viburnum, *Viburnum prunifolium*.

This lovely native is a dense, twiggy, deciduous shrub that can be pruned to grow as a small tree up to twenty feet tall. Its rounded and

symmetrical crown has a spread of six to eight feet. The bark is brown tinged with red. Leaves are one to three inches long, a glossy green, turning shades of red and purple in autumn. The petiole turns red in autumn. Its tiny creamy white flowers appear in mid-spring, borne in flat-topped clusters two to four inches wide. These give way to quarter-inch long blue-black drupes (fruits) that persist until winter. *V. prunifolium* resembles a fish skeleton in winter due to the numerous short shoots growing off its branches.

Cultivated as an ornamental since 1727, blackhaw viburnum is so named because of its resemblance to a hawthorn, but the species are in different families. It is found in woods and thickets from Wisconsin to the east coast and as far south as Texas and Georgia. It grows in dry to medium well-drained soil and is drought tolerant. A sunny woodland is the best location for this species, but it will grow in partial shade. *V. prunifolium* has few insect and disease problems.

These shrubs provide excellent nesting sites and cover for birds and small mammals and shade for us. Their flowers provide nectar for butterflies and other pollinators while the fruit is edible after being frosted, so it’s a great food source for birds and wildlife late in the year. The fruit can also be made into jams and preserves while Native Americans used blackhaw for medicinal purposes. It contains a relative of aspirin and was sometimes used to prevent miscarriages.

One of the most important uses for this species is to replace buckthorn, a highly invasive plant with two- to four-inch thorns that chokes out everything due to the dense shade it creates as it matures into a tall shrub. Species of buckthorn grow everywhere in all conditions and have been designated “the scourge of Barrington.”

Buckthorn leafs out early and retains its leaves late in the season. It aggressively competes with local flora and is particularly destructive to herbaceous woodland and



*Immature blackhaw berries.*

low shrub communities. Learn to recognize buckthorn, and remove plants before they produce seed.

Some residents are loathe to remove their buckthorn because they like the privacy it affords them. Consider a natural privacy hedge of *V. prunifolium*. It will provide all the privacy of buckthorn with none of its disadvantages. When selecting plants to purchase, please remember what Daria Sapp explained in her article “Lawnscape with Native Grasses,” in the Summer, 2010 issue of *CFC News*, “Beware of cultivars, as these are developed to maximize certain traits, such as color or size ... the plant created by Mother Nature in the long run will be healthier and more insect and disease resistant. The native is the plant that has only a genus and species name, such as *Viburnum prunifolium*. The cultivars will have a third, non-Latin name.”

If you have the proper habitat, you can be the good neighbor who creates the good fence. With thoughtful planning, you will soon reap the benefits of a relatively carefree and beautiful addition for your outdoor privacy. Birds and pollinators will benefit as well.

— Virginia Black



*Viburnum prunifolium in winter, still providing privacy.*