



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

COLORFUL WINTER STEMS

By Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener

Q Each winter my bloodtwig dogwood has produced a spectacular show with its bright red stems, but this year the branches are a dull grey. What happened? Can you suggest another shrub/small tree with bright winter stems to replace it?

A If your bloodtwig dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* is healthy, there is a simple method to restore its glory next winter: prune it! Late winter or early spring (February-March), before the leaves begin to appear on the stems, is the best time to prune. This allows the maximum time to enjoy the colorful stems, while encouraging vigorous new shoots and foliage for the coming season.

For dogwoods with intense bark colors, the branches you want to remove are those older than three years old. Those that need pruning are identified by their lack of desired color. Usually this does not include all the stems, but if you have never pruned, it may mean they all must be pruned this spring. Cut as close as possible to the base (crown) of the plant without cutting that base.

If you would like to add additional dogwoods to brighten your winter garden, consider adding a redbud dogwood - *Cornus sericea* sometimes called *C. stolonifera* (red stems), yellowtwig dogwood - *C. flaviramea* (yellow-green stems), or Tatarian dogwood - *C. alba* (blood red stems). Follow the same pruning rules for continued winter color as described for the bloodtwig dogwood.

Many willows also provide brilliant winter interest with their colorful, curving bare branches. The flame willow - *Salix* A 'Flame' has branches with a orange-red glow, silver pussy willow - *S. chaenomeloides* are rich mahogany red, Japanese willow - *S. integra* 'Fleming' are deep red, daphne willow - *S. daphnoides* are purplish-brown, golden willow - *Salix alba* 'Vitellina' are egg yolk yellow, coral bark willow - *Salix alba* 'Britzensis' are reddish rust, and many others.

If you are growing willows for winter color, you must prune all branches on the shrub every year. Erik Draper, horticulture professor at Ohio State University, recommends cutting each stem back to about 6 to 12 inches long or to the point from which they grew last year. As with the dogwoods, prune in late winter or early spring - before spring growth begins.

And don't forget to bring those pruned dogwood and willow branches indoors. Placed in a tall, narrow necked vase, your colorful twigs will add fashionable elegance to your home all year.

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