

Eastern Wahoo—Gardenworthy but Underutilized

by Eva Monheim



Eastern wahoo provides attractive fall color and hanging fruit clusters relished by wildlife.

AS A professor of horticulture, I spend a good bit of time introducing students to hundreds of plants during the school year. So it was a pleasant surprise to have one of my former students in turn introduce me to eastern wahoo (*Euonymus atropurpureus*, USDA Hardiness Zones 3–9, AHS Heat Zones 10–4) some five years ago, when he was working at a native plant garden in New York.

Like other euonymus species, eastern wahoo's opposite leaves are oval with fine serrations along the margins. The bright green summer foliage turns purple to red and sometimes yellow in fall. In early to midsummer, loose clusters of small, deep purple, four-petaled

flowers bloom on long, multibranched stems that emerge from the leaf axils. Although the flowers tend to be obscured by foliage, the capsulelike fruits make up for it by turning from pale green or gray to pink and then splitting open in late summer or early fall to reveal seeds covered in a bright red coating known as an aril. These dangling fruits are persistent and, if not eaten by wildlife, remain ornamental even after the leaves have dropped.

NATIVE RANGE AND GARDEN USES

Eastern wahoo has a broad native range that encompasses much of eastern North America from southern Canada down to the Gulf Coast and Texas, but its prima-

ry habitat is a broad swath running from the Mid-Atlantic region west to Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Although largely an understory tree in the wild, it is adaptable to full sun. It thrives in average to moist soils with a neutral pH and tolerates seasonal flooding.

In the wild, eastern wahoo has been known to grow up to 40 feet tall, but in cultivation it is more likely to top out at 15

Sources

Easy Wild Flowers, Willow Springs, MO. www.easywildflowers.com.

Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN. www.prairiemoon.com.

Sheffield's Seed Company, Locke, NY. www.sheffields.com.

to 20 feet. Consider using it for screening, as part of an informal hedge, along a waterway or pond where it will revel in damp soil, or as a specimen tree in an open area under a high woodland canopy.

OBSCURE BUT WORTHY

Perhaps one reason this small, native tree or large shrub is not better known is that it is sometimes listed under other common names—spindle tree and burning bush—that are associated with notoriously invasive Eurasian relatives *E. europaeus* and *E. alatus*.

A more likely explanation is that it is not widely available in the nursery trade. But the plant is worth seeking out because it grows on you as the season goes on, starting out bright green in spring and early summer and then becoming increasingly colorful from late summer through the end of the year.

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