Dwarf Fruiting Shrubs

by Margo W. Reynolds

To the average gardener the chief attraction of any shrub is usually its flowers: the bigger the better, and if it's bright and showy, too — well, that's just an added plus. Connoisseurs and those familiar with plants know better and recognize the flaws in this kind of thinking. They realize that although flowers are often the most conspicuous feature of a plant, many shrubs offer a great deal more.

Fruits are one of the extra dividends. All too often they are relegated to secondary consideration or overlooked entirely when one is selecting materials for home planting. Yet many shrubs are more highly prized for their fruits than they are for their flowers. Bittersweet is one colorful example, and there are many, many more that will provide year-round interest in a display garden.

A boon to the homeowner with a small piece of property are attractively fruited shrubs that are both small in size and easy to maintain. Dwarf shrubs, evergreen and deciduous alike, that either by habit or occasional pruning can be kept to three feet or below, have an infinite number of uses in today's small gardens. Classified as shrubs by virtue of their woody stems, they fulfill a multitude of purposes in the contemporary landscape. Some form dense, spreading mats and act as soil binders on eroding slopes or banks, as well as ground covers where grass is difficult to establish. Others highlight certain areas of the rock garden or serve as attractive specimen plants in the overall garden scheme. Because of their compact, slow-growing habit, these dwarf shrubs are easy to maintain and remain in scale with the settings for which they were planned.

Most conspicuous among fruiting shrubs are those with red and yellow fruits, and foremost in this category are the viburnums, cotoneasters and barberries. Although there are fewer ornamentally attractive ones, white-fruited shrubs provide their share of color also. Dark blue and black-fruited shrubs are generally the least striking from a color standpoint, but there
are several which do merit more than passing attention. I have included them in the recommended list that follows although they probably should not be given preference over plants with more vivid coloration when space is very limited.

Before listing some of the more spectacular fruiting shrubs, it might be worth just a moment to stop and discuss some of the factors that affect fruit development and insure maximum coloration. Fruiting, in general, is enormously dependent upon both weather and soil conditions. Temperature, rainfall and amount of sunshine all are pertinent. Frost, too, plays an important part. In some instances it serves to hasten development, while in others it merely causes the fruit to brown and drop off prematurely. Long periods of rainy, overcast weather often have a deleterious effect upon fruit ripening. Protracted periods of sunshine and warmth, on the contrary, will cause fruits to ripen and color more quickly.

To the same degree, soil composition is a factor. Poor, dry soil often retards development, whereas the same plant growing in moist, well-drained soil will develop normally and fruit without problem. The addition of nitrogen and phosphorous to the soil of some plants often results in better coloration.

Red-fruited Dwarf Shrubs

Cotoneasters. As a group, cotoneasters are a reliable and ornamental addition to almost any garden. They run the gamut from evergreen to semi-evergreen to deciduous, and vary in height from prostrate ground covers to 18-foot specimens. The flowers of this plant group are fairly inconspicuous and the primary ornamental value lies in their brightly colored berries, seldom more than 1/4-inch in diameter.

Several species can be grouped in the low-growing category with which we are concerned. Among the best are Cotoneaster horizontalis and C. microphylla. C. horizontalis, commonly known as rock spray or rock cotoneaster, is semi-evergreen and attains a height of 18 to 24 inches. Probably the best known and most widely planted cotoneaster, this neat, rugged little plant can be used with equal facility in the rock garden, as a foundation planting, as an edging for the shrub border, or as a ground cover on steep banks. It has an interesting cascading habit, which makes it especially suitable for these kinds of plantings. The fruit is a pea-sized berry produced in abundance that persists well into December.
Cotoneaster horizontalis. Cotoneaster microphylla, a low, evergreen shrub commonly called small-leaved cotoneaster, attains a height of 2 to 3 feet and is an excellent specimen plant for the rock garden. It, too, has persistent small berries. C. thymifolia, a variety of C. microphylla, should also be mentioned here. It has the smallest leaves of any cotoneaster (1/8 to 3/8 inches) and it is a good small specimen plant for a special area of the rock garden.

Viburnums. Most viburnums are rather tall and somewhat coarse for specimen plantings, but their fruits are often spec-
tacular. For this reason it is particularly gratifying to know that there is a small viburnum suitable for rock garden planting. The berries, too, are every bit as showy as they are on some of the larger viburnums. The plant to which I refer is *Viburnum opulus* 'Compactum', a dwarf form of the European cranberrybush.

Although its eventual height is 5 feet, it is a slow grower and periodic pruning will keep it small. This particular variety blooms freely and then produces red berries in great profusion. These fruits have the added plus of persisting throughout the winter. Again, unlike most viburnums, *V. opulus* 'Compactum' is both dainty and compact, assuring it a place of distinction in the small garden.

**Vacciniums.** The mountain cranberry or mountain cowberry, as it is sometimes called, has the Latin name of *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* var. *minus* and is a close relative of the blueberry.
Although not quite as ornamental as the above-mentioned plants, it definitely has a place in naturalistic landscaping provided its requirements for cool shade and moisture are met. It cannot tolerate hot, dry summers, but withstands severe northern winters with ease. The mountain cranberry, which reaches a maximum height of only 4 to 8 feet, is often difficult to establish and one should be forewarned. It is best started in spring from potted plants set out in sandy, acid (pH 5.0) soil.

**Arctostaphylos.** I often wonder whether I always single out this plant because I like the sound of its name, or whether I have other reasons! In this particular case, there is no denying that this diminutive shrub has great value as a fruiting ground cover plant. *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* (bearberry) is certainly worth more than just passing note. Evergreen, with scarlet berries and prostrate, creeping habit, bearberry is well-adapted for growing in poor, dry sandy soils. Increasingly it is being used along highways and sandy bank areas where little else will grow. In the home garden it is of enormous value in the rockery or as a ground cover. Happily, it is nearly maintenance-free as well.

**Blue-fruited Dwarf Shrubs**

**Bayberry.** Blue-berried shrubs with ornamental appeal are many and varied. Among the first to come to my mind is the versatile bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*) with its small greyish-blue fruit. Growing wild throughout its range from Newfoundland to North Carolina, the bayberry is found predominantly in sandy soil along the coast. Because it also prefers full sun, it is a natural choice for seaside gardens and exposed, dry hillsides.

An attractive twig habit, aromatic, semi-evergreen leaves and persistent grey-blue berries all contribute to the ornamental value of this shrub. Although plants are known to grow 8 feet tall, they seldom attain more than 3 to 4 feet and can be kept small and vigorous by occasional heavy pruning of old clumps. It is necessary, however, to plant both male and female plants together in order to insure fruiting, as the sexes are usually separate.

**Holly-grape.** Two species of *Mahonia*, the Oregon holly-grape, lend themselves to planting for their fruits alone, although their
foliage and flowers are equally noteworthy. The larger of the two is *Mahonia aquifolium* which generally grows to about 3 feet. The bright yellow flowers are followed by grape-like clusters of blue-black berries in the fall. The lustrous semi-evergreen to evergreen foliage turns a most attractive purplish-bronze in the autumn.

*Mahonia repens* is similar in every way to the above except that it is smaller (10 inches) and its foliage is slightly less lustrous. Planting in the shade seems to protect these plants from the winter burn to which they are susceptible if grown in the sun. Maintenance is at a minimum, for severe winter weather keeps these superior ornamentals low; occasional pruning will keep them dense and vigorous.

**White-fruitied Dwarf Shrubs**

**Dogwood.** White-fruitied shrubs are probably best represented by *Cornus sericea stolonifera* 'Kelseyi'. This dwarf form of *C. sericea* rarely exceeds 24 inches in height and so is an excellent, though slightly coarse, plant to use at the edge of the shrub border. Although better known for its vivid red twigs which show to best advantage against a new-fallen snow, its white fruits have their own merits against the red twigs. This particular native shrub seems to grow well under most conditions, though it prefers to be somewhat moist.

From red, white and blue we come to the purplish fruit group. Here, two dwarf shrubs of particular ornamental value are the coralberry (*Symphoricarpos orbiculatus*) and the Chilean pernettya (*Pernettya mucronata*). The latter is an excellent specimen and probably one of the best-fruiting small shrubs available. An evergreen with lustrous dark foliage, the pernettya produces fruit in great profusion. Varieties run the gamut from white through pink to a lovely deep purple.

Pernettya's mature height is 1½ feet, so it makes an attractive specimen at the edge of the shrub border or in the rock garden as an accent plant, provided it is growing in an acid soil. Full sun will keep it neat and compact; shade tends to cause untidy, open growth. Like many other shrubs this requires two strains or varieties, growing in close proximity, to insure fertilization and subsequent fruiting. It should be noted here that unlike the other shrubs mentioned, pernettya is only hardy as far north as central Connecticut and Cape Cod.
Coralberry and Indian currant are two of the names under which the native *Symphoricarpos orbiculatus* masquerades. A widely planted ornamental, coralberry's flowers are of secondary importance to the spectacular purplish-red fruits that decorate the gracefully arching branches in the fall. At 3 feet it most definitely fits into our dwarf shrub classification. Its greatest value, perhaps, is that it adapts readily to nearly any soil and grows equally well in sun or shade. Because it suckers freely, it is best used as a soil binder for slope planting.