

## A Winter Beauty: *Viburnum opulus*

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When I think back on my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine, my memories are often drawn to the cold, snowy days of January. In the silence of winter afternoons, the plants in the small town of Terebovlya seemed especially distinct. I often walked through haunting groves of silver birch (*Betula pendula*), white bark against the white snow of fields beyond. Near the school where I worked, two magnificent bigleaf lindens (*Tilia platyphyllos*) towered like giants among young European hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*). However, nothing stood out against the winter gray so much as the bright red fruits of *Viburnum opulus*, a plant that Ukrainians have long praised in song, poem, and prose as a visceral symbol of beauty and identity.

Native to Europe, Asia, and North Africa, *Viburnum opulus* is a multi-stemmed deciduous shrub. It has a rounded growth habit and can grow up to 5 meters (16 feet) tall. Although it is known as *kalyna* in Ukrainian, Western Europeans often call it the guelder rose, so-named for a region of the Netherlands where the popular “snowball tree” cultivar supposedly originated. In North America, *Viburnum opulus* is called European cranberrybush, because of its tart, cranberry-like red fruits, despite the fact that it is in the moschatel family (Adoxaceae) and unrelated to the true cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*), a member of the rhododendron family (Ericaceae). (European cranberrybush is *V. opulus* var. *opulus*; the similar looking American cranberrybush, previously known as *V. trilobum*, is now known as *V. opulus* var. *americanum*.)

During the summer months, *Viburnum opulus* bears three-lobed, dark green leaves, 5 to 10 centimeters (2 to 4 inches) long and wide. These palmate leaves, which resemble those of some maples, have deeply impressed venation, wrinkled surfaces, and soft undersides. In the autumn, the foliage often turns beautiful hues of red and purple.

Red is also the color of the fully ripened berry-like drupes (fleshy, single-seeded fruits),

which mature in late fall and can remain on the plant until the following spring. The vibrant fruits hang in dense clusters and, although they are primarily consumed by birds, they are also edible to humans. Tart and bitter until softened by frost, they are nonetheless believed to have medicinal properties, and Ukrainians consume small quantities raw, baked, or in tea to help treat various illnesses. It is also common to see fruit clusters adorning entryways, as well as on traditional Ukrainian embroidered clothing, as symbols of health and fertility.

In North America, the beautiful white lacecap inflorescences of *Viburnum opulus* are often considered the plant’s defining aesthetic characteristic. Each cyme is composed of a single ring of large, white petaled, sterile florets on the outside and bunches of smaller fertile florets on the inside. Some cultivars, such as the popular *V. opulus* ‘Roseum’ produce inflorescences composed of entirely sterile flowers that look like snowballs or pom-poms, leading to the nickname “snowball tree.” Another popular cultivar, *Viburnum opulus* ‘Xanthocarpum’ has the typical flat white corymbs, but produces bright golden yellow fruits instead of red.

Earlier this year, I stopped by three *Viburnum opulus* accessions (352-78\*A, C, and E, collected in the wild from the northeast of Denmark) in our *Viburnum* Collection. Humble looking among their neighbors, it was interesting to reflect that this plant is ubiquitous in small Ukrainian towns and villages where it is proudly planted next to homes. I had the chance to reflect on this again later in October when my wife and I were visiting friends in Ukraine. While there, one of her former colleagues asked where I worked, and I stumbled over describing the Arnold Arboretum and its mission of plant research and conservation. However, when he followed up my explanation by asking whether or not we grew *kalyna*, I was proud to say yes.

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