

NINEBARK

SHRUB FOR EVERYONE



Common ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) is one of those shrubs that I learned about in college and then forgot about until some time around the Millennium, when purple-leaved Diabolo® transformed a humble native shrub into a fashionable garden plant. While not the first color form, Diabolo® grabbed attention and clearly spurred breeders to get to work. What followed was a raft of colorful selections, from duskier purples to eye-catching yellows. Indeed, enhanced color is the modern ninebarks' cachet—burgundy, purple, yellow, red, orange, and coppery leaves in spring, summer, and fall. As green shrubs go, ninebark is serviceable albeit ho-hum; colorized, and it becomes something special.

This shrub has its detractors; after all, ninebarks can be large, coarse, and gangly. In his tome on woody plants, Michael Dirr archly dismisses ninebark: “The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum has a large col-

lection of ninebarks and after looking over the entire group, I still came away with the opinion that about anything is better than a *Physocarpus opulifolius*.” To be fair, that is his opinion from the 1990s, and he was referring to the world before Diabolo®.

It seems to me that ninebarks may still be a bit underappreciated, but I hope that’s not true for much longer. Perhaps the market saturation of the original colorized options—Diabolo®, Coppertina®, and ‘Center Glow’—made them ubiquitous, but their disease problems made them vexing. Newer introductions offer enhanced leaf colors, smaller habits, and disease resistance. Until recently, I had evaluated only three ninebarks in my career; that’s why I was eager to grow and compare the newest ones against the old standards. The trial is ongoing, but initial results are promising. So now is a good time to give ninebarks another look, or maybe a first look.

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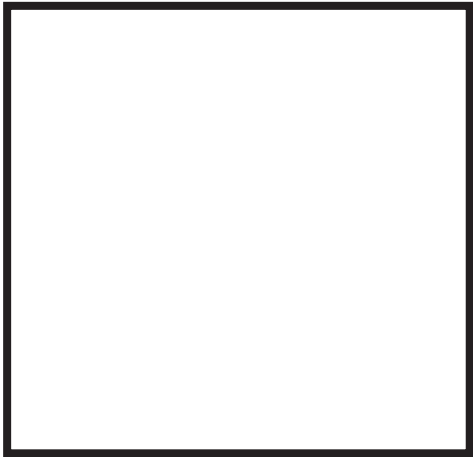
: Full sun to partial shade; moist, well-drained soil

▲ ▲ : Eastern North America

: Aphids

▲ : Fire blight, leaf spot, powdery mildew

▲ ▲ : Softwood cuttings or root suckers



▲

The vibrant foliage of Amber Jubilee™ (photo p. 43) is most radiant in spring, when it glows deep orange rather than the orange-bronze of similar cultivars such as 'Center Glow' or Coppertina™. The color shifts in midsummer to green with bronze-flushed, golden-yellow terminal leaves, and finally to an autumnal blend of orange, red, bronze, and purplish green. The white flowers are pleasing, and butterflies love them, but the kaleidoscopic color show is longer lasting and more satisfying. Amber Jubilee™ is a broad, vase-shaped plant with arching branches. Its light tawny twigs pair nicely with the light tan-gray exfoliating bark, which looks almost white when the branches are bare.

Red Robe™ is an evolution of exquisite colors from spring to fall. Leaves emerge glossy orange-bronze but quickly lose luster as they darken to bronze-brown with orangey overtones. The summer mantle of dark burgundy—flecked with golden-orange at the tips—glows red when backlit by the sun and becomes ruddier as summer winds down. I have not seen Red Robe™ at its full size—6 to 8 feet tall and wide—but am kind of giddy thinking about a big vase-shaped plant clad in all those rich colors. White flowers, flushed with purple, give way to bright red fruit clusters that ripen to deep burgundy in fall. Dark red-purple twigs fade to burnished copper in winter, contrasting beautifully with the hoary gray peeling bark.

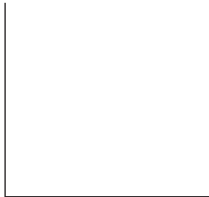
'Dart's Gold' has impressed me greatly, and more so for being more of an old-timer; there is never a minute that its colorful foliage disappoints. The brilliant golden yellow of its new leaves rivals that of spring-blooming forsythias! Early summer is a study in orange and gold—there is a nuanced gradation from top to bottom of bright orange, golden-orange, golden-yellow, and yellow-green. Although the foliage fades to mostly green in late summer, it turns brighter yellow again in fall with hints of coppery orange that glow like small flames at the tips. There are clusters of white flowers in late spring, but honestly, the dazzling leaves hog all the attention. The compact, rounded habit—4 to 5 feet tall and wide—is not as well-branched as that of some dwarf varieties, but it has more internal branching than many larger cultivars. Dark tawny twigs and light tannish bark stand out in a snowy winter garden.

Tiny Wine® is one of the original compact cultivars with small leaves and many slender side branches. The leaves, held on coppery twigs, open bronze-green and then age to dark burgundy-green before settling in late summer on deep green with a burgundy overlay. In fall, red smolders from the center outward; the final mix of burgundy and red is quite good. Pink-flowered Tiny Wine® shares a similarity to Sweet Cherry

TINY WINE®

FORMING

Tea™, but its leaf coloring is darker. In the winter landscape, its well-branched habit shows best, with cinnamon twigs sprouting



Learn the pruning basics

It's a good idea to cut out dead, crossed, or leggy stems on a ninebark every year in late winter or early spring. Aside from that general maintenance, there are three solid pruning methods you can employ. But keep one important fact in mind before you start: Ninebarks fl7 flor m7early 7fli7 6g Ni0asg



Illustrations: Karalyn Demos

METHOD | 2 |

Give the shrub a light, postbloom shearing to head back any errant or overly vigorous stems and even out the summer habit.



METHOD | 3 |

Renewal or rejuvenation pruning is a good technique for overgrown or scraggly ninebarks. Cutting all stems to the ground in late winter allows you to start over. Plants will be compact for a few years but will eventually reach their full size. Flowers and fruits for the year are sacrificed every time this is done, so do it sparingly. The exfoliating bark on older wood is also less pronounced for several years until stems gain some age.



| SOURCES |

- Nature Hills Nursery, Omaha, NE; 888-864-7663; naturehills.com
- Wayside Gardens, Hodges, SC; 800-845-1124; waysidegardens.com
- Rarefind Nursery, Jackson, NJ; 732-833-0613; rarefindnursery.com
- White Flower Farm, Litchfield, CT; 800-503-9624; whiteflowerfarm.com

