

IN THE PINK

Winter blooms take the edge off the rainy season

There's something very cheering about fresh flowers in winter, and some of the most reliable providers of cheer in that way are the winter-flowering viburnums. The most familiar of these is *Viburnum x bodnantense* "Dawn," sometimes sold, aptly but incorrectly, as "Pink Dawn."

"Familiar" is relative, of course. I am always surprised, when I drive around town in December and January and spot those bare brown branches liberally sprinkled with rosy flowers, to realize how few people in fact plant this viburnum or, for that matter, any other winter-flowering shrub.

Thanks in part to the existence in Springfield of an outstanding nursery that specializes in the genus, witch hazels have become quite common in our area. Gossler Farms Nursery currently lists 30 varieties of witch hazel, most of which bloom in January and February. But all bloom in some variation of yellow or coppery red — plenty of room, therefore, for something pink.

Viburnum Dawn can't boast the brilliant yellow-and-orange fall foliage color of the witch hazels, their elegant, tree-like structure or, for that matter, their subtle sweet-and-spicy scent. Dawn, however, has other virtues, not least of which is the fact that deer don't usually bother it. (They love to eat witch hazels.)

Dawn's full name conveys to those in the know that it is a hybrid between two species and is named for Bodnant, a famous garden in North Wales where it originated. Dawn has a sibling named *V. x bodnantense* "Charles Lamont."

Dawn may have the slight edge with its deeper pink color, but whereas Dawn blooms sporadically all through late fall and early winter, opening a new batch of tight little bundles of flowers with every mild spell, Charles opens all of his flowers together a little later in the season, making a shorter but showier display. Gossler Farms Nursery offers both.

The two parents of Charles Lamont and Dawn are *Viburnum farreri* and *V. grandiflorum*. The latter isn't often planted, in spite of its showy pink flowers, but *V. farreri* is



VIBURNUM X BODNANTENSE

immensely popular in Britain, conspicuous in London parks and gardens for many weeks with its fragrant white, pink-tinged bloom in late fall and early winter.

Here it is much more common to see Dawn. There is a dwarf form of *V. farreri* that grows only 3 or 4 feet tall. It may be worth growing in a small garden for some winter scent and color, but it makes a rather shapeless tangle of skinny branches when the leaves fall off.

Viburnum farreri was aptly known for many years as *V. fragrans*. The newer name honors Reginald Farrer, an eccentric explorer who introduced this Chinese favorite to the West. The fragrance remains and is much loved. The scent of the farreri hybrids gets mixed reviews, however. The American plantsman and writer Michael Dirr describes the scent as "sweet with a slight edge." Many British writers seem to enjoy it, even as a cut flower. I like it in moderation, but only outdoors. Some people downright dislike the smell. Roger Gossler seems to like it but describes it as "musky-sweet." Maybe it's the musky part that gets to me when we bring the flowers inside.

Viburnum x bodnantense grows to 8 or 10 feet and has splendid foliage, perfectly described by Dirr: "The leaves, 2 to 4 inches long, are heavily pleated with impressed veins, rich green with red petioles." The leaves may turn deep red before they fall, although sometimes they just fall. A notable thing about these shrubs is their structure. Young plants are bushy and upright, but as they mature they develop a multi-

stemmed umbrella shape, arching outward to form a leafy canopy above almost naked, rough-barked lower limbs.

Some people consider the bare stems a negative, but I like this form, which is easily under-planted with perennials or bushy shrubs, preferably evergreen. Think hellebores, compact Oregon grape and low-growing rhododendrons. The size of mature plants can be controlled somewhat with regular pruning. The trick is to cut out a few of the tallest, thickest limbs near ground level, every one to two years. To do this easily you'll probably need a narrow-bladed pruning saw to reach between the crowded branches.

These viburnums are not suited for hot, dry locations, but their water needs are not outrageous if they get some afternoon shade. Strong indirect light (read: the east or north side of a building that is not shaded by over-hanging trees) will produce plenty of flowers.

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