

“Dog” Plants for the Dog Days of Summer

August is here, and with it comes the dog days of summer. Lacking inspiration for this month’s column, I started wandering around the internet, looking up dog plants. Boy was I surprised with what I found. Of course I was familiar with dogwood (*Cornus*) and dog’s tooth lily (*Erythronium*), but beyond that I found lists of plants with “dog” in the common name that piqued my interest. I even found pictures of little poofy dogs created out of chrysanthemum flowers. (Just a little too scary for me!)

But getting back to plants...it was interesting to read that some common names such as dog berry can refer to several different plants (*Ribes cynosbati*, *Ardisia escallonioides*, *Cornus sanguinea*), whereas some plants like *R. cynosbati* (dog berry, dog bramble) and *Rosa canina* (dog rose, dog brier) have multiple common names that include dog. And *R. canina* has something doglike in both common and botanical names when you realize that canina is a derivative of canine. (This confusion of common names brings home the importance of using botanical names when you are searching for a specific plant.)

So then I started looking at images of these dog plants, and found that some of them were definitely uninteresting: dog fennel (both *Anthemis cotula* and *Eupatorium capillifolium*), dog grass (*Agropyron*) and dog’s tooth grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) being prime examples. But one that didn’t sound very exciting, dogweed (*Thymophylla*), turned out to have a sweet little yellow daisy flower, and one species, five-needle dogweed (*T. pentachaeta*) is a west coast native to boot. All of the dogweeds grow well from seed sown in place, and reward the casual gardener with masses of flowers.

Some of the dog plant images made me wonder how dog actually became part of the common name. The several dog violets, including *Viola canina* and *V. riviana* are lovely violets in several shades of blue, and *Lathyrus sativus*, dogtooth pea, is a blue sweet-pea. There is nothing to suggest in them that the dog prefix is an indication of worthlessness (as one source mentioned). One of the real puzzlers was dog hobble or fetterbush, *Leucothoe fontanesiana*. At least it was until I discovered that it’s evergreen arching stems grow so thickly along streambanks in the southern Appalachians that it impedes progress for man and beast alike. Different species and selections of *Leucothoe* can, however, be quite lovely in the right setting. Not usually in the South County area, though. They prefer moist, rich acid soil, a woodland setting out of hot sun or drying wind.

Ever heard of a wet dog plant? *Illicium floridanum* is so-named because the flowers (to some folks) have an aroma that brings wet dogs to mind. A second count against growing the plant in this area is it’s need for ample water. It’s too bad, since the plant is attractive and well behaved, and the flowers are absolutely gorgeous. They are waxy, shaped something like starfish, and come in white and shades from pink to maroon.

Dogbane sounds (to me) like something out of the Middle Ages, in fact the first written use of that common name was around AD 65 by Dioscorides in a medical text. I read that the botanical name, *Apocynum*, means “away, dog”, so both the common and the botanical name refer to the toxic milky sap. Interestingly, a chemical found in the plant (Cymarin) was used until 1952 in the U.S. as a cardiac stimulant.

There seemed to be no end to dog plants, I found references to dog parsley, dogtail cactus, dog’s mercury, dog daisy, but nothing caught my interest again until I ran across dog flower. It turns out that in India, *Antirrhinum major* (what we call snapdragon) is known as dog flower. And Indian children play the same game with the flowers as children everywhere that dog flowers are grown, pinching the sides of the blossom to open and close the jaws!

I mentioned dog’s-tooth violet, *Erythronium dens-canis*, earlier, as one of the dog plants I’d known. (I didn’t know it well, or for long, since it didn’t suffer long in my care) It is a gorgeous flower in the lily family, native to Europe. The few leaves grow at the base of the plant, dark green with brown mottling. Pink nodding flowers grow on long stalks and remind me of shooting stars. I think I need to learn more about it and try again.

I’ll have to save how much I love dogwood trees for another column. And there is so much about *Cornus* to love. Grow them for the flowers, the gorgeous bark, the fall color, and more.

In honor of the dog days of summer, here’s something for the lovers of the four-footed kind. Go to www.pgvvet.bc.ca to see an extensive list of plants poisonous to dogs.

~Nancy Schramm

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