

Ninebarks, botanically named *Physocarpus opulifolius*, are not new shrubs. They are native to the eastern part of North America, in the United States from Minnesota to Florida. Common ninebarks grow from five to twelve feet tall and wide. Their arching branches present small white or pink flower clusters from late spring to early summer. Exfoliating bark provides winter interest.

Adaptability to their growing conditions, cold hardiness, and their dense growth habit make ninebarks an appealing choice for gardeners who want an attractive screen, erosion control, or shelter for birds. They are attractive, but not spectacular.

In the late 1990's, plant breeders realized the potential of common ninebarks, and cultivars were developed and introduced. New cultivars are now available with unique foliage colors – copper, orange, golden yellow, burgundy and deep purple – and in smaller, garden-appropriate sizes.

Like the common ninebark, they bloom from late spring to early summer. Pink or white flower clusters, resembling the blooms of spiraea, are loved by butterflies and other pollinators. They exhibit bark that peels away in strips to reveal several layers of inner bark, each a slightly different color.

Now they are suitable for use as specimen plants in perennial gardens and accent plants in mixed borders. The smallest varieties are appropriate for large containers. Most of these cultivars are resistant to powdery mildew and outstanding shrubs for the landscape.

Summer Wine sports rich, deeply cut, dark wine-red foliage and light pink flowers. It grows up to six feet tall and wide.

Use Summer Wine as a focal point in the summer landscape or a backdrop for summer-blooming perennials. The golden yellow flowers of black-eyed Susan or pink blooms of phlox glow in front of Summer Wine's dark foliage. In very hot summers, leaves may turn green.

Amber Jubilee is one of my favorite ninebark cultivars. New growth is a unique combination of orange, yellow and coppery-red; mature leaves are dark green; and in fall, the foliage takes on red and purple tones. Its flowers are white.

Amber Jubilee grows up to six feet tall and four feet wide. Plant this beauty as a hedge of unexpected color or in a mixed border.

If the space in a garden calls for something even smaller, consider Little Devil. At just three to four feet tall and wide, Little Devil is suitable for the middle of a perennial garden or toward the front of a mixed border. An abundance of creamy white flowers stand out against its fine-textured, dark burgundy foliage in June and then sporadically the rest of the summer.

For gardeners who adore the foliage color of barberries but don't delight in their thorns, Little Devil could be planted instead. It is also fitting for a foundation planting scheme.

Tiny Wine is another compact variety similar in size to Little Devil. Pink-blushed white flowers cover the branches of dark bronze to burgundy foliage in late spring and early summer. Show off its extra bushy form, pretty leaves, and petite but prolific flowers in a large container garden or as a low hedge around a patio.

All of these cultivars are best grown in at least a half-day of full sun to show off their best foliage color. If they grow too wide for their allotted space, they can be downsized with pruning. Removing a third of the branches will encourage new shoots while maintaining a more compact form.

Diana Stoll is a horticulturist and garden writer. She blogs at gardenwithdiana.com.