

A few years ago we fortuitously acquired an ornamental tree that today I applaud as a *plant for all seasons*. Few plants, whether woody or herbaceous, fit this category, but those that do possess significant attributes making them attractive throughout the year. Whether it be spring, summer, autumn or winter, such a plant reliably displays stellar qualities. This tree is botanically called *Cornus kousa*, more commonly known as Japanese dogwood, Chinese dogwood or Kousa dogwood.

A number of years ago, Rita and I made a contribution to the Arbor Day Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and planting of trees. As a thank you gift, we received ten small seedlings of ornamental shrubs and trees. Because of their small stature, I planted each at the end of our vegetable garden. There they were allowed to grow for a number of years.

Of the ten seedlings we received, three were flowering dogwood trees belonging to the genus species *Cornus florida* — or so I thought. Each year as they grew larger, I noticed one appeared slightly different. Its branching configuration was marginally different.

It also had a faint variation in leaf shape. Last autumn, for the first time, I noticed that each tree had developed flower buds; an indication it was time to move them to their permanent location in our landscape. Early this spring, I transplanted all three. Realizing that one was different, I planted it close to our home where we could readily observe it while sitting on our



deck. Such a move proved fortunate. After it leafed out and began to bloom, we could immediately see that it was not a *Cornus florida*. Having conducted a little research, I soon discovered our little tree to be a *Cornus kousa*.

What makes *Cornus kousa* a plant for all seasons?

My research revealed that this small tree matures to about twenty feet. Described as an understory tree, it is ideal to serve as a specimen plant with seasonal accents. Kousa dogwood is rated hardy for Zones 5 through 8, making it a good choice for central Nebraska. It is rated superior for disease and pest resistance. Other cultural qualities include adaptability to dry, compacted soils and neutrality to alkaline soil. However; as this year definitely proved, such a tree requires supplemental irrigation during hot, dry periods or leaf scorch will occur. Scorch problems lessen as the tree matures and becomes established. Kousa dogwood's foliage is medium to dark green, elliptical in shape, changing from green to shades of brick red to reddish-purple in the autumn.



then to red by September, resembling large, solitary, upright raspberries. When ripe the fruits are readily eaten by birds and squirrels.

Following leaf drop in late autumn, its tan to dark brown twigs are adorned with conical floral buds, adding to its winter interest. With age, Kousa dogwood bark becomes a mixture of brown and creamy-gray splotches which also add to its ornamental interest.

In mid-to-late June, after most other dogwoods have flowered, Kousa dogwood blooms with prominent uplifted two-to-three inch flowers comprised of four showy white petals called bracts surrounding a yellow-green center. The bloom period lasts for about six weeks. By early August, globular green fruits develop, change to pink,





Numerous cultivars of *Cornus kousa* exist. One, called Gold Star, has variegated foliage with a central golden stripe that changes to green by late summer. Another interesting variety is *Cornus kousa* 'Lustgarten Weeping'. This variety is a grafted weeping form with its flowers prominently viewed along arching pendulous stems. A variety called Moonbeam has flowers that reach seven inches in diameter instead of the normal three inches.

Not often does a plant deserve the title of *plant for all seasons*, but through an act of good fortune, Rita and I acquired one. We love our Kousa dogwood, and I strongly encourage others to consider planting Kousas in their landscapes.