

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Euonymus is a rather odd name for a family of small, attractive shrubs whose uses range from hedges, specimen plantings, ground covers and in some cases as climbers. There are about 175 species in this genus. They can be deciduous, semi-evergreen, or totally evergreen. Some are shrubs and others are small trees. Euonymus is cultivated for its interesting leaf markings or the beautiful fall color some varieties display.

E. alatus dubbed 'burning bush' is probably the most well known of this family. It has dark green leaves which turn a brilliant red in the autumn. Its branches, which are visible after the leaves fall, have broad, corky wings along their margins. They give rise to another nickname for this bush, 'winged euonymus'. E. compacta is a smaller version of this species. It is often seen in parking lots as dividers between the rows of parking spaces. It is a low maintenance shrub as is many of the deciduous euonymus.

Another species that is worth mentioning is E. fortunei. It is an evergreen vine or shrub. Prostrate forms can be used to control soil erosion on hillsides and is a better choice than English ivy, which is fast becoming a problem here. Members of this species have interesting leaf variegations. 'Canadale Gold' is a compact shrub with light green leaves edged in yellow. 'Colorata' is a sprawling groundcover with dark purple leaves in fall and winter. "Emerald Gaiety" has green leaves with white edging and 'Emerald'n Gold' is similar except it has gold-edged leaves. In addition to its colorful leaves this variety may produce interesting fruit which split to reveal seeds with colorful coatings.

This shrub is easy to grow and for the most part has few problems. Most species will take a wide range of exposures from full sun to deep shade. Deciduous types give the best fall color in full sun. Mildew and scale insects can be a problem. Grow in well-drained soil. They need moderate moisture, although, deciduous types tolerate dryer soils. Variegated cultivars need full sun to enhance their coloration. Shelter evergreen types from cold, drying winds in the winter. Most species can be propagated by softwood cuttings in the summer. Pruning these shrubs is done to maintain a desirable shape and to keep the growth from becoming too leggy. Pinch stem tips to encourage more compact growth. Thin older branches occasionally to open the bush so air can circulate and prevent mildew. Also, prune out dead or winter-damaged branches. Do major pruning in early spring after the last frost. Heavy pruning may be necessary to renovate an old shrub. E. alatus needs little pruning. Thin branches selectively every other year rather than making heading cuts to maintain it's shape. On variegated types prune out branches if leaves have reverted to solid green. Vine types of E. fortunei, can be trained to climb a wall or fence, by pinching the tips of young shoots to encourage branching.

Check your favorite nursery for one of the many colorful species of this shrub to add to your plant collection. There is such a wide variety that there surely must be one that will appeal to every gardener.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.