

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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It is difficult to find a shrub that fits all or most all, locations and soil conditions. Ninebark (Physocarpus) is one of these plants. The bark is peeling and cracked, quite interesting at close observation. The name was derived from the belief that it has nine layers of bark.

Ninebark adapts to dry or heavy soils, as long as the ground is not boggy. Full sun to partial shade suits it, with the purple foliage of the 'Diablo' variety showing off best in full sun. It is a very resistant plant when it comes to insect and disease problems. At a time when new, serious insects seem to be cropping up, this shrub has fared well. Japanese beetles do not appear to be a problem. Left to its own devices, 'Diablo' spreads by underground runners, grows upright, and forms a slight fountain of eight or even twelve feet. You always have the option of cutting it back to maintain a small, extremely compact shrub. It does well with a severe pruning. Since the bark only peels on old wood you would lose this feature of the plant. You can, however, prune this shrub into a standard tree shape. Done this way you get to see even more of the peeling bark and also enjoy the other wonderful aspects of it. Perfect for anyone concerned about putting a tree into a view corridor as it remains quite petite in the landscape.

'Diablo' may well be the most striking of the different kinds available. It is not as inclined to sucker as the species, but gets just as tall. It blooms from late May through July. Peak of flower is in June. The white flowers have a faint pinkish cast and occur in two inch corymbs, a corymb being a fat round snowball made up of tinier blooms. Bright red seeds follow the blooms. It looks as though red blossoms, in clusters two or three inches wide, follow the white flowers. The intense red seeds against the purple-black leaves are beautiful. After a few weeks these seeds fade to mahogany and are less obvious because they are so close to the color of the leaves. They remain attached to the branches all through autumn, eventually turning black but remaining well-formed and attractive. They will remain on the branches after leaf-fall.

The most striking of this plant's many features is the deep, dark purple leaves, which lend a most distinguished foliage to any garden. The leaves are maple-like (palmate) with an irregularly serrated margin. Here in Skagit County the purple leaves last through summer and can even darken to nearly black in July. In more humid and hotter climates, they might fade to green with only a blush of the spring purple. In autumn the leaf color changes to a Halloween-like Pumpkin orange. Cuttings are nice to display on the porch with a carved pumpkin.

In summary, 'Diablo' is an easy growing shrub/tree that is very hardy in *Sunset* zones 3-7 and adaptable to a wide range of conditions. The flowers and foliage are great for cutting. It is attractive to bees, butterflies and/or birds.

Consider this variety of Ninebark when looking for something a little different. You will not be disappointed.

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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.