

Dodonaea viscosa Varnish Leaf, Hopbush¹

Edward F. Gilman²

Introduction

The shiny green leaves of this shrub have a varnished appearance that gives this plant its most widely used common name. The varnish leaf is a fast growing, broad-leaved, evergreen shrub that can grow 10- to 15-feet tall. It is most commonly seen at about 6- to 10-feet tall. The “varnished” leaves of this plant have a resinous coating that is a protection against water loss, and this allows the plants to be exceptionally drought tolerant. Leaves vary in shape from spatulate to elliptic or obovate. Margins of the leaves are often turned under. Greenish yellow flowers are without true petals and appear in terminal clusters that are 3 inches in length. This shrub blooms in the spring and fall, and flowers on the same plant may be male, female, or perfect. The most outstanding part of this plant is the pendent fruit. These emerge green, turn yellow green, then pink and red, and then brown as they mature. The three-parted seed pods have 3 or 4 rounded wings.

General Information

Scientific name: *Dodonaea viscosa*

Pronunciation: doe-DOE-nee-uh viss-KOE-suh

Common name(s): varnish leaf, hopbush

Family: *Sapindaceae*

Plant type: tree

USDA hardiness zones: 9 through 11 (Fig. 1)

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: native to Florida

Uses: specimen; espalier; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); screen

Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries



Figure 1. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 10 to 15 feet

Spread: 6 to 15 feet

Plant habit: oval

Plant density: symmetrical habit with a regular (or smooth) outline and individuals having more or less identical forms

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: fine

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2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: oblanceolate; obovate; spatulate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: yellow

Flower characteristic: summer flowering; fall flowering; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: pod or pod-like

Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: green; red; yellow

Fruit characteristic: showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; can be trained to grow with a short, single trunk; no horns

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: acidic; alkaline; sand; loam

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: unknown

Plant spacing: not applicable

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

One may use varnish leaf as a specimen due to its nice fruit display. The plant is also attractive when it is not in fruit. Planted 5 to 8 feet apart, varnish leaf makes a nice hedge or background plant, and it is very effective when employed as a screen. It can also be grown in fence rows and is interesting when espaliered. It is a useful plant that is underutilized.

Dodonaea viscosa will tolerate dry sandy or rocky soils, salt spray, windy areas, and drought conditions. It favors areas that receive full sun and is often cultivated in loamy or sandy soils.

Dodonaea viscosa 'Purpurea' has been called the most popular cultivar of the *Dodonaea* genus. It is currently most popular in the western U.S. Seedlings can vary a lot in color, and purple-leafed varieties will turn green in full shade. It has a wide tolerance for different soils, winds, and heat, when established, will be drought-resistant. The plant is used in landscapes in the western United States.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.