Red-stem dogwood’s small white flowers appear in the spring and continue sporadically into the fall. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.

Mention the name dogwood and undoubtedly most will envision the large shrub or small tree of our local foothills and conifer forests famous for prominent displays of huge white flowers visible in early spring. The species is our native mountain dogwood, and while possible, it is somewhat of a challenge to grow in Redding area gardens, mainly due to our climate. Luckily, there are several other native dogwood species that have many unique traits of their own and do grow well in our local gardens. Red-stem dogwood is one of those species. While lacking the large showy white flowers (actually bracts, but that’s another story) of mountain dogwood, red-stem dogwood offers plenty of year-round interest while providing many landscape functions and wildlife habitat values.

Red-stem dogwood (Cornus sericea) is widespread across much of North America, as evidenced by its long list of common names that include red osier, American dogwood, creek dogwood, Colorado dogwood, and red-twig dogwood. This deciduous shrub grows in forests and woodlands below 9,000 feet elevation and is found in streamside areas, swamps, and meadows. Locally, red-stem dogwood is commonly found along many of our nearby foothill and mountain creeks, often forming dense streamside thickets.

Red-stem dogwood is a fairly aggressive, multi-stemmed and spreading shrub. Plants are up to 15 feet tall with a wide, rounded habit. The shrub is characterized by long, smooth, whip-like branches that are often bright or wine red and serve proof of its
common name. These branches are so pretty and unique that they were sometimes used in Native American basketry. The large two- to four-inch long leaves are broadly elliptical and show distinct parallel veins. Young leaves start as bright green, gradually turning darker with age, providing a wonderful contrast of foliage color. Small creamy white flowers occur in two- to three-inch wide multi-branched clusters that appear in the spring and continue sporadically into the fall. At home, our red-stem dogwood always sends out a few new flower clusters in late August and September, well after most plants are “done” for the year. The flowers produce fleshy white or bluish berry-like fruits that really attract the birds.

Used as a border along lawns or other cooler locations, red-stem dogwood does very well in partially shaded to shaded locations. The large showy leaves provide another burst of color as they turn various shades of red, yellow, orange, purple, and pink in the fall. With the leaves gone, the shrub allows for full viewing of the bright red twigs and dense branch structure, which add nice winter color and provides good cover for our wintering birds. The shrub is generally disease free and requires very little maintenance. Pruning can be done to control size, remove unwanted rooting stems, and also stimulates growth of many more young bright red stems.

Red-stem dogwood can be used as a specimen plant complimented by low growing shrubs and other ground cover, or as an associate with other similar shade-loving species. Ours does very well in a border between the lawn and house and forms a nice thicket with mock orange, wild rose, snowberry, and California buckeye. Readily available at the local CNPS plant sales, you will find red-stem dogwood just as beautiful and interesting as its more famous big-flowered relative.