

Go Native!

Gardening with native plants on Lake George

BY EMILY DEBOLT

February's Plant of the Month Virginia Rose. *Rosa virginiana*

In honor of Valentine's Day, I have selected one of our native roses for this month. Don't be fooled by the name. Yes, Virginia rose is in fact native to New York and the Adirondacks. It is in fact probably the most common rose along much of the East Coast. In addition to being disease-resistant and drought-tolerant, Virginia rose is probably our hardiest native rose, hardy to zone 3, making this is a great rose for Lake George gardens.

While not as showy as the classic tea roses, Virginia rose is no ugly duckling either. With glossy foliage, large pink flowers, persistent scarlet fruit, and the classic rose scent, this native rose provides something for all your senses (did I forget to mention the thorns) and four seasons of interest for the garden. All native roses have pink, five-petaled flowers with bright yellow centers. They are designed this way to be most attractive to pollinators, with bumblebees and honeybees being their main pollinators.

Virginia Rose blooms in early to mid summer in a flush – and then sporadically here and there over the rest of the summer. The large, 2-3" diameter flowers set into rose hips that are a brilliant scarlet color and last most of the winter. These fruits are packed with Vitamin C, making them an important source of winter nutrition for many birds such as bluebirds and cardinals. In fact, by weight, rose hips contain about one hundred times the amount of Vitamin C than oranges. They can be eaten, made into jam or steeped to make rose hips tea. While semi-evergreen in the southern part of its range, in the North Country they are deciduous. The shiny, leathery, leaves turn a deep red or maroon in the fall before dropping.

Averaging only 2-4 feet in height, Virginia rose can sometimes grow as large as 6 ft tall. This shrub will grow in diameter 6-12 inches a year, eventually getting up to 6 ft wide if you let it. While it tends to grow more clumped than some of our other native roses, Virginia rose does still spread by roots, so keep this in mind and pick a place with plenty of room for it to grow when placing this plant in your landscape. If it starts to head in the wrong direction, a good sharp spade in the spring should do the trick. Virginia rose blooms on old wood, so while not needed, you can prune it after it flowers if you like.

Virginia rose prefers well drained soil that can be dry to

moist, and full to partial sun. Naturally found in thickets and woodland gaps along the coast from Newfoundland south to Virginia, Virginia rose is great for massing or shrub borders in the home landscape. It is salt tolerant, making it good for using as a hedgerow along the road or your driveway where salt damage to more sensitive plants can occur. It can also grow in less than ideal soils – such as sandy or acidic – making it useful in many landscaping situations. While not prone to disease like the classic tea roses, it is also not totally immune either and can get powdery mildew or black spot, although this is not typically a problem. Virginia Rose provides food and cover for a wide range of animals and is a great alternative to Japanese Barberry, a very popular, yet invasive ornamental shrub.

"Go Native" highlights a different native plant each month that can be used in the home garden and landscape. Written by Emily DeBolt, owner of Fiddlehead Creek Farm and Native Plant Nursery in Hartford, NY. For more info about gardening with native plants, Emily can be reached at Emily@fiddleheadcreek.com.