

Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*)

Ninebark is multi-stemmed shrub, with densely arched, re-curved branches, reaching heights between 5 to 12 feet, with a spread from 6 to 12 feet in the Mid-Atlantic area. Birds like to use the dense cover for nesting sites. This shrub is variously referred to as 'atlantic, eastern, and common' ninebark.

The leaves of Ninebark show a lot of variation in size and shape even within one bush. Leaves on the smaller branches show the most shape variation. The flowers bloom at a time when the first rush of spring ephemerals is over, but summer's blooms have not yet begun, a welcome addition at that time.

The Ninebark also has distinctive bark. Over time the bark exfoliates loosely, or shreds, in narrow strips. Each layer is a slightly different color due to age and exposure to the air. This feature gives the plant a touch of winter interest.

Once the flowering stage is passed, a fruit begins to form immediately, which is dark glossy red in color. This inflated capsule is where the scientific name comes from: *Physocarpus opulifolius* – *physis*, a bladder and *karpon*, a fruit. In short order the segments begin to fade in color, and the whole structure, which faced upward when it was in blossom, now flops over and dangles downward. Thus the color progression has moved from the pink/white of the opening flower buds through dark red, dull red, to a rosy tan. It provides further visual interest by clinging on into winter until and unless eaten by birds.

This shrub is very tough and easy to maintain, it can be rejuvenated by cutting it to the ground in late winter. Ninebark is a native plant, that is still very hardy, making it useful in the urban forest.