

That Red Bush is a Burning Bush!

Published 10/29/19 – Free picture of a trimmed burning bush hedge from clker.com

One of the most colorful plants this time of year is the burning bush. The majority of the year they're anonymous green shrubs but their fall bright red color is unrivaled and really give a pop to any landscape.

Native to northeastern Asia and central China, in the extreme north east part of the United States it's considered an invasive species to the point that in a few New England states it's illegal to import or sell burning bush. Birds are attracted to the seeds which is how the plant spreads, but if they're invasive in our area I'm not aware of it.

The scientific name for burning bush is *Euonymus alatus*; the word 'alatus' means "winged" in Latin and refers to corky ridges which grow on the stems of the plants. When the plant is green one of the identifying characteristics are those ridges which are not seen on any other plants in our area. Burning bush do produce small clusters of pale greenish insignificant flowers throughout a long period in spring. Guaranteed no one buys or plants a burning bush for it's flowers though.



In our area two varieties do especially well, the larger "winged" and the smaller "dwarf" burning bush. They tolerate our alkaline and clay soils, can withstand occasional drought, and can grow in full sun but still tolerate part shade. Both varieties have a rounded growth pattern with the winged variety topping out at 10' and the dwarf at 6' or so but both can be trimmed if either size is too big for an area. Both varieties grow in a dense pattern of limbs and branches but with regular trimming become even more dense making for more of a stunning show in the fall.

In my opinion, burning bush are best used as a stand alone plant with nothing else right up against them. This doesn't make a lot of sense when it's just a green mass but come fall it'll spectacularly stand out and make whatever area in your landscape it's in visually pop. However, burning bush are also used quite frequently and do quite well as a hedge kept either in their natural form or trimmed.

Because burning bush are easily trimmed some gardeners take a normal burning bush, which branches close to the ground and basically grows about as wide as it is tall from the ground up, and turn it into a tree. This is done by selecting a single central branch as the future trunk and removing all other branches when it's young. By continually keeping the single trunk as the only main vertical growth and removing any lower branches from that trunk as it continues to grow, over a few years a tree shape develops. Once the plants is tall enough the upper areas of the trunk are allowed to grow outwards usually into a ball shape. Continual trimming is necessary as this is really just a form of topiary, but the mature results are a small tree that turns the brightest of all reds in the fall.

Plant them in the spring or fall. Either way burning bush is a very showy fall plant appropriate for almost anyone's yard.

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