



The Potting Bench



STEP ASIDE, HYDRANGEA - THERE'S A NEW SHRUB IN TOWN

Step aside, Hydrangea. Well, at least make a little room. Folks are discovering a less-thirsty, more compact blooming, much more fragrant, wonderfully capable standalone or hedge, one that also bears fruit, making it a hit with the birds. It's actually a Viburnum, and if you haven't given it a proper look yet, here's a peek.

Specifically, we're talking about the Korean spice viburnum (*Viburnum carlesii*), a shrub that's quietly winning over gardeners who've grown a little tired of babying their hydrangeas through brutal summers. Where hydrangeas tend to sulk, wilt, and throw fits when the heat cranks up, viburnum keeps its composure. The flowers, clusters of small, rounded blooms in white to soft pink, carry a spicy-sweet fragrance that'll stop you in your tracks every time you walk past. And when the blooms give way to small berries in late summer and fall, the birds show up like they've been waiting all season. It's that kind of plant: generous, low-drama, high-reward.

A Perfect Fit for Magnolia Point
Here in northeast Florida, we're gardening in a mixed

bag of conditions. We're in USDA hardiness zone 9a, which means mild winters (mostly), long hot summers, and humidity that rarely takes a vacation. The good news is that Korean spice viburnum handles this better than you might expect for a shrub with "Korean spice" in its name.

Our soils are another story. Northeast Florida is notorious for its sandy, fast-draining soils that hold nutrients about as well as a colander holds water. Viburnum is adaptable and can handle sandy, clay, or loam conditions, but it performs best in neutral to slightly acidic soil, with a pH between 5.5 and 7.0. If you're not sure where your soil falls, a test kit from your local garden center will tell you.

Viburnum doesn't want to sit in standing water. (Or, that old gardener's saw, 'They don't like wet feet'...I love that!) A few inches of pine straw or wood chip mulch spread around the base of the shrub (but kept a few inches away from the stem) will do wonders for moisture retention and keeping soil temperatures more stable through summer.

Light and Placement

Korean spice viburnums are quite flexible about light. Full sun will give you the most flowers, but they

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can do well in our 'hood, where we can usually find a Goldilocks spot with AM sun and PM shade. This is the plant's sweet spot:

enough light for good blooming without the stress of baking in the western sun through August.

They top out at around 4 to 8 feet tall and wide depending on the variety, making them excellent candidates for a mixed border, a privacy hedge, or a striking standalone focal point near an entryway or patio where you can enjoy that fragrance up close.

First-Year Care: Setting Down Roots

When you plant your viburnum, spring or fall are the ideal times in our area and keep it consistently watered through that first year! A deep watering two to three times a week during dry spells is a good rule of thumb. Keep the root zone moist, not soggy, so check the soil a few inches down before you water again. *No wet feet!*

Watering and Feeding Once Established

Viburnum is a low-maintenance, drought resistant shrub. But that doesn't mean "ignore it completely" as we know from recent experience. During periods of extended dry weather, giving it a good deep soak every week or two will keep it looking its best.

For feeding, a slow-release granular fertilizer for shrubs or acid-loving plants (look for one with a balanced nitrogen-forward ratio) applied once in early spring is typically all it needs. Work lightly into the soil around the drip line and water in well.

Cold Weather

This is where things get interesting for northeast Florida gardeners. Korean spice viburnum is hardy

down to about 0°F (zone 5), so it will easily survive a typical Jacksonville winter. Viburnum may drop some or most of its leaves in a cold winter. Don't panic, it almost always 'leaves-out' enthusiastically in spring.

Pruning

Unlike hydrangeas, which require care when pruning, (bloom on old wood? new wood? it depends on the type!), not viburnum. Prune only if you need to shape it or remove any dead or diseased branches. That's early summer, right after flowering, so you don't cut off next year's buds. If you need to do a size reduction, do your hard pruning in late spring; it's a forgiving shrub.

Where to Find Yours

Korean spice viburnum is becoming easier to source, though your local independent garden center may need to order it if it's not on the shelf. Online, you can find reliable selections through Fast Growing Trees, Nature Hills Nursery, or even Amazon. Look for these standout compact varieties:

***Viburnum carlesii* (featured)** - beloved for its large rounded compact clusters of intensely fragrant flowers. Hardy standalone or hedge.

Aurora - known for large, tubular pink flowers with exceptional fragrance; a real showstopper.

Sugar n Spice - stays around 6 feet tall, offers deep wine-colored fall foliage for extra season-long interest.

Compactum - a tidy 4-foot shrub that's ideal for smaller spaces or container planting.

Diana - features rosy red buds that open to white flowers, adding a lovely two-toned effect as the blooms mature.

However you plant it, however you use it: hedge, specimen, or patio container, Korean spice viburnum rewards you, asking for very little in return. That's the kind of plant our Magnolia gardens need more of!

- STORY, PHOTOS: EDITOR

