CORNACEAE · DOGWOOD FAMILY

Red Osier Dogwood

Cornus sericea

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POMO · MIWOK · OHLONE · COAST SALISH · MANY OTHERS

Native Range: Throughout North America — coast to coast, Alaska to Mexico. Widespread in California riparian areas.

⊕ About This Plant

Red osier dogwood is a deciduous multi-stemmed shrub growing 6–15 feet tall, instantly recognizable by its brilliant red to deep crimson bark that becomes especially vivid in winter after the leaves drop. The stems are straight, smooth, and flexible. White flower clusters appear in late spring, followed by white to bluish-white berries in summer.

This is one of the most culturally significant shrubs across all of North America — used by more indigenous tribes than almost any other plant species on the continent. The red bark made it valuable for ceremonial use, the flexible stems were essential for basketry, and the inner bark was mixed with tobacco for kinnikinnick (traditional smoking mixture). It thrives along streams, in wetlands, and in any moist location.

Growing Conditions

LIGHT

Full sun to part shade (best bark color in sun)

WATER

Moderate to high — prefers consistent moisture, tolerates seasonal flooding

SOIL

Moist, rich soils. Tolerates clay and seasonal flooding.

HARDINESS

USDA Zones 2–9

MATURE SIZE

6–15 ft tall, spreading by suckers to form thickets

GROWTH RATE

Fast — vigorous grower in moist conditions

BLOOM

Flat clusters of small white flowers, May–June. White to bluish berries in summer. The real show is the red winter bark.

HABITAT

Streambanks, wetlands, moist meadows, and riparian corridors. Found throughout California in suitable wet habitats.

Traditional & Cultural Uses

Kinnikinnick — Ceremonial Smoking

The dried inner bark was one of the most important ingredients in kinnikinnick, the traditional smoking mixture used ceremonially by many tribes across North

America. It was mixed with tobacco, bearberry leaves, and other plants. The practice was ceremonial and communal, not recreational.

Basketry & Weaving

The straight, flexible, brightly colored stems were widely used in basketry — both for structural elements and for the vivid red decorative accents. Stems were harvested in winter when the color was most intense. The Pomo and many other California tribes valued red osier dogwood stems.

Food — Berries

The white berries were eaten by many tribes, either fresh or dried. While not the most flavorful berry, they were a reliable food source. Some groups mixed them with other foods.

Dye

The red bark produced a red-to-brown dye used for fibers, baskets, and hides.

Sweat Lodge Construction

The flexible stems were used to create the framework for sweat lodges and other temporary structures.

A LIVING RELATIONSHIP

Red osier dogwood stands out most in winter, when everything else is bare and brown, its stems blaze crimson. It's a reminder that beauty and purpose don't disappear in hard seasons — sometimes they become most visible. The ceremonial smoking practice of kinnikinnick was a way of sending prayers upward with the smoke. The plant that carries the prayer is as important as the words.

Medicinal Uses

Fever & Pain Relief

Inner bark tea was widely used to reduce fevers and treat headaches and body pain. The bark contains salicin-related compounds similar to those found in willow.

Digestive Aid

Bark preparations were used for diarrhea, stomach troubles, and as a general tonic.

Cold & Respiratory

Inner bark tea was used for colds, coughs, and sore throats across many tribal traditions.

Eye Wash

A wash made from the bark or stems was used to treat sore or irritated eyes.

Ecological Role

Streambank stabilization — One of the best riparian plants for erosion control. Extensive root system and suckering habit hold soil along waterways.

Wildlife food & habitat — Berries eaten by over 100 bird species. Dense thickets provide critical nesting and shelter habitat for birds and small mammals.

Wetland indicator — Presence indicates healthy riparian or wetland conditions.

Pollinator support — Flower clusters attract native bees and beneficial insects in spring.

Winter interest — Brilliant red bark provides year-round wildlife visibility and habitat structure.

Propagation

1. **Hardwood cuttings:** The easiest method — cut 6–12 inch sections of dormant stems in winter and stick directly into moist soil. Very high success rate.
2. **Suckers:** Dig and transplant rooted suckers from established plants in spring or fall.
3. **Layering:** Stems that touch moist ground will often root naturally.
4. **Seed:** Clean from berries in fall, cold stratify 60–90 days, sow in spring. Slower than vegetative methods.

Grounded in Pomo Knowledge · Open to All of Mendocino County

Because everyone is indigenous to somewhere.