

NINEBARK

A DURABLE SHRUB FOR EVERYONE

Newer varieties have better habits, color, and disease resistance

BY RICHARD HAWKE

Common ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) is one of those shrubs that I learned about in college and then forgot about until some time around the Millennium, when purple-leaved Diabolo® transformed a humble native shrub into a fashionable garden plant. While not the first color form, Diabolo® grabbed attention and clearly spurred breeders to get to work. What followed was a raft of colorful selections, from dusky purples to eye-catching yellows. Indeed, enhanced color is the modern ninebarks' cachet—burgundy, purple, yellow, red, orange, and coppery leaves in spring, summer, and fall. As green shrubs go, ninebark is serviceable albeit ho-hum; colorized, and it becomes something special.

This shrub has its detractors; after all, ninebarks can be large, coarse, and gangly. In his tome on woody plants, Michael Dirr archly dismisses ninebark: “The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum has a large col-

lection of ninebarks and after looking over the entire group, I still came away with the opinion that about anything is better than a *Physocarpus*.” To be fair, that is his opinion from the 1990s, and he was referring to the world before Diabolo®.

It seems to me that ninebarks may still be a bit underappreciated, but I hope that's not true for much longer. Perhaps the market saturation of the original colorized options—Diabolo®, Coppertina®, and ‘Center Glow’—made them ubiquitous, but their disease problems made them vexing. Newer introductions offer enhanced leaf colors, smaller habits, and disease resistance. Until recently, I had evaluated only three ninebarks in my career; that's why I was eager to grow and compare the newest ones against the old standards. The trial is ongoing, but initial results are promising. So now is a good time to give ninebarks another look, or maybe a first look.

AT A GLANCE

Physocarpus opulifolius and cvs.

ZONES: 2–7

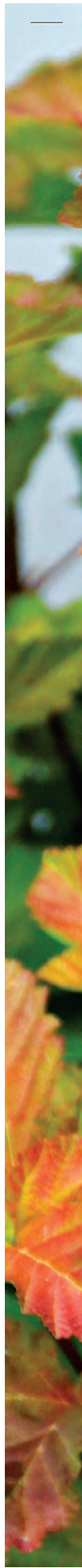
CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; moist, well-drained soil

NATIVE RANGE: Eastern North America

PESTS: Aphids

DISEASES: Fire blight, leaf spot, powdery mildew

PROPAGATION: Softwood cuttings or root suckers for transplanting





AMBER JUBILEE™

A color show like no other. Ninebarks have come a long way in the past 20 years, with new options sporting colorful foliage, bark, stems, fruit, and flowers.

TOP-PERFORMING NINEBARKS



RED ROBE™

TRIAL | PARAMETERS

The Chicago Botanic Garden is currently evaluating 26 different ninebarks in comparative trials that started in 2019.

► **HOW LONG:** Three years into a six-year study

► **ZONE:** 5b

► **CONDITIONS:** Full sun; well-drained, alkaline, clay-loam soil

► **CARE:** We provided minimal care, allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions. Besides observing their ornamental traits, we monitored the plants to see how well they grew and adapted to environmental and soil conditions, while keeping a close eye on any disease or pest problems and assessing plant injury or losses over winter.



'DART'S GOLD'

The vibrant foliage of **Amber Jubilee™** (photo p. 43) is most radiant in spring, when it glows deep orange rather than the orange-bronze of similar cultivars such as ‘Center Glow’ or Coppertina™. The color shifts in midsummer to green with bronze-flushed, golden-yellow terminal leaves, and finally to an autumnal blend of orange, red, bronze, and purplish green. The white flowers are pleasing, and butterflies love them, but the kaleidoscopic color show is longer lasting and more satisfying. Amber Jubilee™ is a broad, vase-shaped plant with arching branches. Its light tawny twigs pair nicely with the light tan-gray exfoliating bark, which looks almost white when the branches are bare.

Red Robe™ is an evolution of exquisite colors from spring to fall. Leaves emerge glossy orange-bronze but quickly lose luster as they darken to bronze-brown with orangey overtones. The summer mantle of dark burgundy—flecked with golden-orange at the tips—glows red when backlit by the sun and becomes ruddier as summer winds down. I have not seen Red Robe™ at its full size—6 to 8 feet tall and wide—but am kind of giddy thinking about a big vase-shaped plant clad in all those rich colors. White flowers, flushed with purple, give way to bright red fruit clusters that ripen to deep burgundy in fall. Dark red-purple twigs fade to burnished copper in winter, contrasting beautifully with the hoary gray peeling bark.

‘**Dart’s Gold**’ has impressed me greatly, and more so for being more of an old-timer; there is never a minute that its colorful foliage disappoints. The brilliant golden yellow of its new leaves rivals that of spring-blooming forsythias! Early summer is a study in orange and gold—there is a nuanced gradation from top to bottom of bright orange, golden-orange, golden-yellow, and yellow-green. Although the foliage fades to mostly green in late summer, it turns brighter yellow again in fall with hints of coppery orange that glow like small flames at the tips. There are clusters of white flowers in late spring, but honestly, the dazzling leaves hog all the attention. The compact, rounded habit—4 to 5 feet tall and wide—is not as well-branched as that of some dwarf varieties, but it has more internal branching than many larger cultivars. Dark tawny twigs and light tannish bark stand out in a snowy winter garden.

Tiny Wine® is one of the original compact cultivars with small leaves and many slender side branches. The leaves, held on coppery twigs, open bronze-green and then age to dark burgundy-green before settling in late summer on deep green with a burgundy overlay. In fall, red smolders from the center outward; the final mix of burgundy and red is quite good. Pink-flowered Tiny Wine® shares a similarity to Sweet Cherry



TINY WINE®

TOP-PERFORMING NINEBARKS



FESTIVUS GOLD®



GINGER WINE®



TINY WINE® GOLD

Tea™, but its leaf coloring is darker. In the winter landscape, its well-branched habit shows best, with cinnamon twigs sprouting from exfoliating tan-gray bark. This variety stays trim and neat.

Festivus Gold® is as luminous as ‘Dart’s Gold’ but is even more radiant, if that is possible. The golden yellow spring foliage matures to yellow-green, with terminal leaves remaining bright yellow all summer. In fall the leaves are flushed with orange and bronze but never really lose their golden glow. The tidy, rounded habit with ascending light copper-colored branches is more compact than ‘Dart’s Gold’—3 to 4 feet tall and wide—making Festivus Gold® perfect for small landscapes. The tan exfoliating bark reveals soft salmon tones, which reminds me a bit of river birch. The best part, *Seinfeld* fans, is that airing grievances and engaging in feats of strength are not required to enjoy this plant.

Tiny Wine® Gold is the yellow version of Tiny Wine® and features a similarly tight, refined habit and size, small leaves, and increased branching. White flowers, opening from pink buds, liberally pepper the branches in late spring. Labeling it simply

yellow is lazy—it is in truth a bonanza of color from spring through fall. Leaves open golden green on reddish purple twigs, gradually becoming a mix of yellow and green, with each stem crowned in orange-copper in summertime. Interestingly, fall color develops in reverse—soft orange and yellow with burgundy tinges flush upward from the bottom, leaving the tips green until last. Come winter, twigs fade to tawny above light tannish gray bark; this shows more prominently in the landscape because of the branching pattern.

The slightly arching stems of **Ginger Wine®** are clothed in rich burgundy foliage in summer and fall but start out very differently. The red-orange-bronze leaves are strikingly beautiful against the whitish bark as they unfold. (*Game of Thrones* nerd alert—the colors at this point remind me of the red and white weirwood trees of Westeros.) The dark burgundy summer twigs mirror the leaf color perfectly; winter twigs are a lighter cinnamon. Much like Red Robe™, the deep burgundy fall color is accented by redder leaves at the tips. The bushy vase-shaped habit looks more open in spring and winter because side branching is less pronounced than on Tiny Wine®.

PLANT

STATS

Ninebark culture and care

A low-maintenance native shrub, ninebark grows best in full sun to light shade. Although it prefers evenly moist, well-drained soil, it is adaptable to rocky and clay soils and is drought tolerant once established. Here is more of what you should know about this tough plant.

▶ FLOWERS AND FRUIT ENHANCE THE COLOR SHOW

Clusters of pretty white or pink blossoms appear for a short time in late spring to early summer, followed by inflated fruits that add a spot of red late in the season.

▶ EXPECT A FEW PESTS AND DISEASES

As part of the rose family, ninebarks can experience some of the same problems; fire blight, leaf spot, and aphids are occasionally troublesome. Ninebarks are considered deer resistant, which we all know is somewhat of a misnomer since deer defy such labels. Foliar chlorosis may be a problem in high-alkaline soil.

▶ MILDEW IS LESS OF AN ISSUE ON NEWER VARIETIES

I have seen powdery mildew on ninebark foliage so densely fuzzy white that the leaves are barely recognizable as leaves. Mildew has yet to be an issue in our trial; however, ‘Chameleon’, Diabolo®, ‘Morning Star’, ‘Nugget’, Summer Wine®, and Summer Wine® Black have had minor infections. Only ‘Center Glow’ and Coppertina® were severely impacted by mildew in 2020; it was one thing I could not blame on the pandemic.

▶ DON’T UNDERPLAY THE BARK

Ninebark gets its name from the way the older bark splits and shreds into narrow papery layers of slightly different colors. This trait is especially eye-catching in winter and gives the garden interest in the off-season.



FRUIT



APHID INFESTATION



POWDERY MILDEW

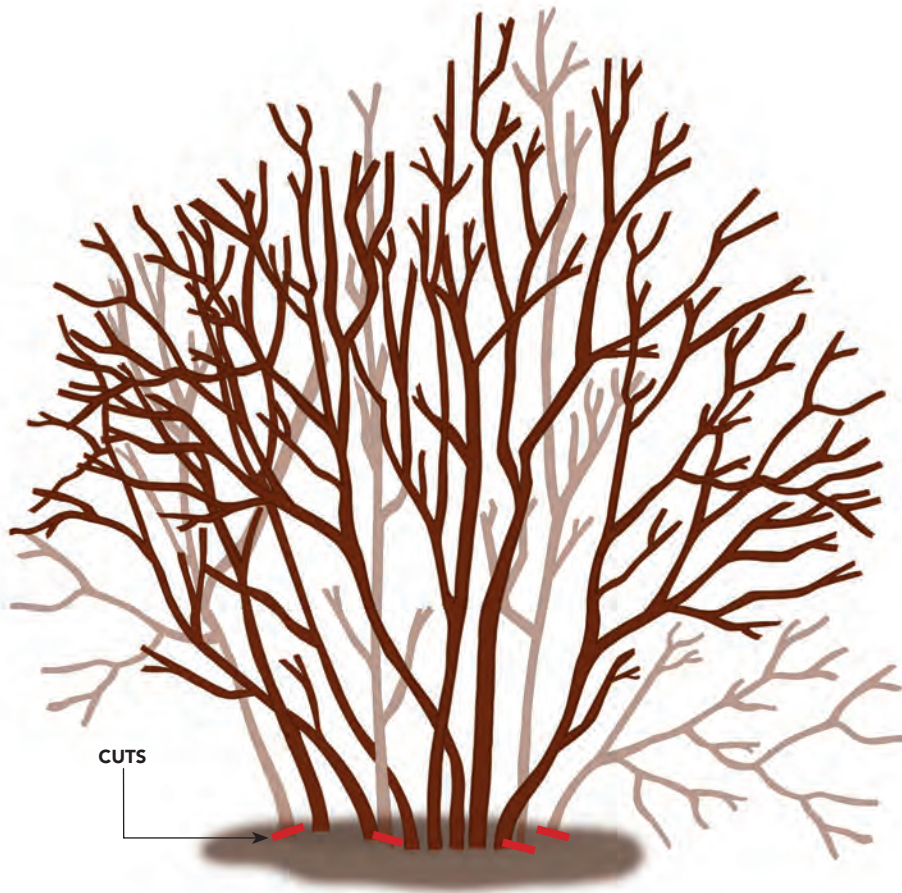


BARK

TECHNIQUE

Learn the pruning basics

It's a good idea to cut out dead, crossed, or leggy stems on a ninebark every year in late winter or early spring. Aside from that general maintenance, there are three solid pruning methods you can employ. But keep one important fact in mind before you start: Ninebarks flower on old wood, so any early season pruning decreases the bloom, while pruning after flowering decreases fruit.



METHOD | 1 |

Selectively remove up to a third of the oldest stems each year (in late winter) over a three-year cycle. This is a stepped approach to rejuvenation and improves air circulation, which can help alleviate powdery mildew infections.



BEFORE

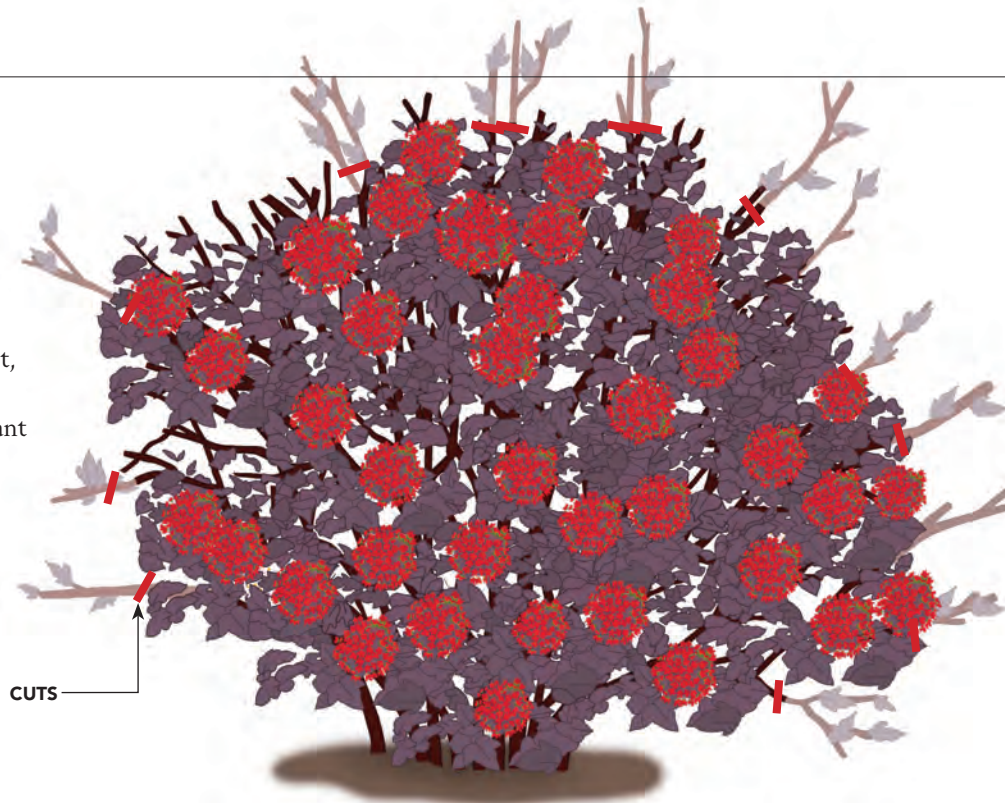


AFTER

Illustrations: Karalyn Demos

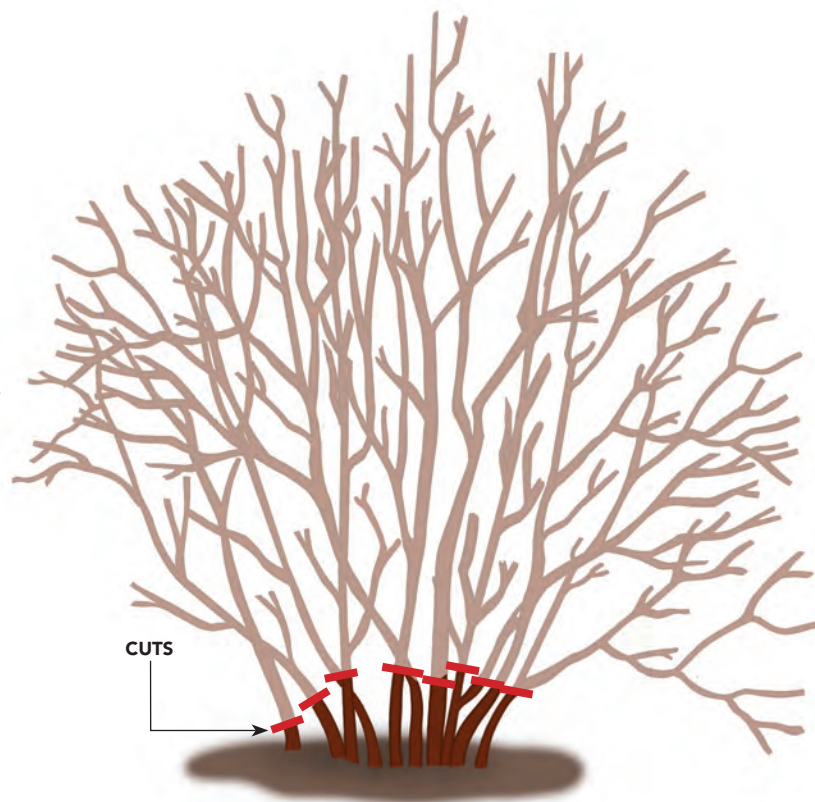
METHOD | 2 |

Give the shrub a light, postbloom shearing to head back any errant or overly vigorous stems and even out the summer habit.



METHOD | 3 |

Renewal or rejuvenation pruning is a good technique for overgrown or scraggly ninebarks. Cutting all stems to the ground in late winter allows you to start over. Plants will be compact for a few years but will eventually reach their full size. Flowers and fruits for the year are sacrificed every time this is done, so do it sparingly. The exfoliating bark on older wood is also less pronounced for several years until stems gain some age.



BRAND-NEW
NINEBARKS SHOWING PROMISE



The compact ninebarks intrigue me—their reduced sizes and refined habits are made for small urban gardens like mine. And they challenge the notion that ninebarks are all coarse or tangled shrubs. The exceptionally small foliage of **Sweet Cherry Tea™** starts out bronze-green and turns bright burgundy; the leaves have a lovely red hue that I do not see on other purple varieties in summer. By fall, red leaves are dotted throughout the burgundy crown. Unexpectedly, Sweet Cherry Tea™ reblooms in midsummer—and not a smattering of flowers here and there but a flower cluster on every tip.



If purple is your color, you will love **Panther®**. The large, black-burgundy leaves hold their intense color all summer; even the twigs are deep burgundy, and the atypically pink flowers accentuate the dark features. While not exactly a patent-leather shine, the leaves do gleam. Red accents develop as days shorten, although burgundy remains dominant. Winter twigs of deep mahogany partner splendidly with the pale white-gray of older wood. Panther® has a unique columnar habit that brings height to tight spaces without the unwelcome girth.

| SOURCES |

- **Nature Hills Nursery**, Omaha, NE; 888-864-7663; naturehills.com
- **Wayside Gardens**, Hodges, SC; 800-845-1124; waysidegardens.com
- **Rarefind Nursery**, Jackson, NJ; 732-833-0613; rarefindnursery.com
- **White Flower Farm**, Litchfield, CT; 800-503-9624; whiteflowerfarm.com

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Raspberry Lemonade™ comes from the same breeder as Sweet Cherry Tea™, so there is a natural resemblance. While expected to be of a similar mature size, Raspberry Lemonade™ is so far showing a significantly broader habit—32 inches tall and 74 inches wide. The broad, slightly arching habit is well-branched and more refined than that of larger cultivars. Golden green leaves fade to green with a golden tint as days turn warmer; the coppery yellow overlay on terminal leaves deepens as fall comes on. White flower clusters sprout from the end of every branch in spring, followed by dangling coral-red fruits. An early fall rebloom was a delightful surprise. The small leaves are densely borne on slender pinkish red twigs, and the exfoliating tan and gray bark looks almost white after the leaves drop.



Canary Cheers™ is a paler version of 'Dart's Gold' but is no less a beauty. The bright yellow-green spring leaves mellow to a deeper shade in summer and are suffused with light peachy orange and a touch of bronze in fall. Reddish twigs add to the summer show and turn dark tawny above distinctly near-white bark in winter. Canary Cheers™ has a robust rounded habit—to 6 feet tall with arching stems—with fewer internal branches than compact ninebarks. The pink and white flowers combined with the fresh yellow-and-green leaves heighten the springtime Easter-basket vibe.

Photos: Bill Johnson (p. 43; p. 44, bottom); millettphotomedia.com (p. 43, inset; p. 45); courtesy of Janice Becker (p. 44, top; p. 46, top left; p. 50, top right); Danielle Sherry (p. 46, bottom left, right; p. 47-48, all); courtesy of Gavin Young (p. 50, top left, bottom right); courtesy of Richard Hawke (p. 50, bottom left)

| RATING KEY |

★★★★ Excellent ★★★ Good ★★ Fair ★ Poor

RATING	NAME <i>Physocarpus opulifolius</i>	HEIGHT	WIDTH	LEAF COLOR			SUMMER TWIGS	WINTER TWIGS AND BARK	FLOWER COLOR
				Spring	Summer	Fall			
★★★★	Amber Jubilee™ ('Jefam')	4 to 6 feet	4 to 6 feet	deep orange	green, bronze, golden yellow	orange, red, bronze, purplish green	cinnamon	light tawny and light gray	white
★★★	'Aureus'	6 to 8 feet	6 to 8 feet	golden green	bright yellowish green	golden yellow	reddish tan	tawny and whitish gray	white
★★★★	Canary Cheers™ ('KLMZZ')	6 feet	6 feet	bright yellow-green	yellow-green	yellow, orange, bronze	red	dark tawny and pale tan-gray	white and pink
★★	'Center Glow'	6 to 8 feet	6 to 8 feet	orange-bronze	dark purple	purple red	deep burgundy	dark cinnamon and tannish gray	pinkish white
★★	'Chameleon'	3 to 5 feet	3 to 5 feet	bronze and yellow	green and burgundy	burgundy and orange	burgundy	copper and gray	pinkish white
★★	Coppertina® ('Mindia')	6 to 8 feet	6 to 8 feet	orange-bronze	bronze-green	purple and red	red	cinnamon and pale whitish gray	pink
★★★★	'Dart's Gold'	4 to 5 feet	4 to 5 feet	golden yellow	yellow-green	yellow and orange	cinnamon-brown	dark tawny and tan	white
★★★	Diabolo® ('Monlo')	8 feet	8 feet	orange-bronze	dark purple	reddish purple	dark burgundy	light cinnamon and pale tannish gray	creamy white
★★★★	Festivus Gold® ('Bert Dart's G')	3 to 4 feet	3 to 4 feet	golden yellow	yellow-green	yellow, orange, bronze	tan	light copper and tan	white
★★	'Fire and Brimstone'	8 feet	5 to 6 feet	dark bronze	dark purple	burgundy, red	dark burgundy	cinnamon pale silvery gray	white
★★★	Fireside® ('UMNharpell')	5 to 7 feet	4 to 6 feet	dark bronze-mahogany	black-burgundy	dark burgundy	black-burgundy	burgundy-brown and gray-white	pink
★★★	Ginger Wine® ('SMNPOBLR')	5 to 6 feet	5 to 6 feet	red-orange-bronze	burgundy	deep burgundy and red	dark burgundy	light brown, whitish gray	white
★★★	Lemon Candy™ ('Podaras 3')	4 to 6 feet	4 to 6 feet	bright golden yellow	yellow-green	yellow and bronze	light pinkish red	copper and gray-white	white
★★★★	Little Devil™ ('Donna May')	3 to 4 feet	3 to 4 feet	dark burgundy	dark burgundy	dark burgundy	red-purple	cinnamon-brown	creamy white
★★	'Morning Star'	8 feet	8 feet	golden green	yellow-green	golden yellow and orange	dark red	light tawny and tan-gray	white
★★★	'Nanus'	2 to 5 feet	3 to 4 feet	green	green	purple, orange, red, yellow	reddish purple	light tawny and tan-gray	white
★★★	'Nugget'	6 to 8 feet	6 to 8 feet	golden green	green and yellow	deep golden yellow and orange	pinkish red	pale tawny and light tan-gray	white
★★★★	Panther® ('N5')	4 to 6 feet	3 to 4 feet	deep bronze	black-burgundy	burgundy and red	dark burgundy	burgundy-brown and whitish gray	pink
★★★★	Raspberry Lemonade™ ('ZLEyel2')	4 feet	4 feet	golden yellow	green and gold	golden yellow and green	pinkish red	light tawny and whitish gray	white
★★★★	Red Robe™ ('Artboe401')	6 to 8 feet	6 to 8 feet	orange-bronze	dark burgundy	burgundy and red	dark burgundy	copper and whitish gray	white
★★★	Summer Wine® ('Seward')	5 to 8 feet	5 to 8 feet	bronze-brown	dark burgundy	dark burgundy and red	burgundy	cinnamon-burgundy and gray	pink
★★★	Summer Wine® Black ('SMNPMS')	5 to 6 feet	5 to 6 feet	dark burgundy-bronze	black-purple	dark burgundy	dark burgundy	light brown and whitish gray	pink
★★★★	Sweet Cherry Tea™ ('ZLEBic5')	3 to 4 feet	3 to 4 feet	bronze-green	bright burgundy	burgundy and red	copper-brown	dark cinnamon and yellowish tan	pink
★★★★	Tiny Wine® ('SMNPOTW')	3 to 5 feet	3 to 5 feet	bronze-green	dark burgundy-green	burgundy and red	copper	cinnamon and tan-gray	pink
★★★★	Tiny Wine® Gold ('SMNPOTWG')	3 to 5 feet	3 to 5 feet	golden green	yellow and green	orange, yellow, burgundy	reddish purple	tawny and light tan-gray	white

Photos: Bill Johnson (p. 43; p. 44, bottom); milletphotomedia.com (p. 43, inset; p. 45); courtesy of Janice Becker (p. 44, top; p. 46, top left; p. 50, top right); Danielle Sherry (p. 46, bottom left, right; p. 47-48, all); courtesy of Gavin Young (p. 50, top left, bottom right); courtesy of Richard Hawke (p. 50, bottom left)