



Japanese barberry, *Berberis thunbergii*, has never been satisfied being a bit player. Prized by gardeners, landscapers, and growers for its hardy constitution and vibrant colors, this deciduous shrub has played the roles of both silent protector and ornamental backdrop in lawns and gardens across the country since it was first introduced in the late 19th century.

There's no denying it, barberry is a beautiful plant. It grows in a lush rainbow of greens and reds. "Depending on which cultivar you have—they can be anything from a bright yellow green to a duller green to a rosy to a gold and even crimson. They really provide a nice contrast to other plants in your landscape," says Julie Robinson, executive director of the West Virginia Nursery & Landscape Association.

Barberry has so many qualities. Settlers cultivated some varieties for hedgerows and used others for dyes and even jams, syrups, meads, and candies. It's great at keeping cattle in and pests like deer out, thanks to its deeply grooved, dangerously spiny branches. And it offers diverse growing habits. "Some are spreaders. Some are dwarf varieties that are very well-behaved. Some have a more vertical growing habit, and some can get pretty

darn big. They are versatile," Robinson says. Once well-rooted, Japanese barberry gets comfortable in a wide range of soil and light conditions. Though it doesn't particularly enjoy very wet or very dry landscapes, it will set up shop in a dismal swamp, on a dry city lot, or in your shady backyard without much fuss, and it will still bloom and set fruit. In a nutshell, Robinson says, barberry is the perfect garden staple. "It's attractive, durable, and difficult to kill," she says. As a landscape plant, barberry even seems to love a good pruning, so cutting it back aggressively won't hurt its feelings. And since its flowers are monoecious—meaning both male and female parts are contained within each bud—it doesn't even need another barberry nearby to spread its offspring, just some hungry birds or even the underside of your shoe.

That, coupled with its prolific nature—putting out many clusters of bright red or orange russet berries from July to October—barberry always had the potential to get out of hand. It was only a matter of time.

"Unfortunately, starting in the northwest, it began to invade untended areas of forest and farmland," Robinson says. It was a slow creep but creep it did, across the country and into West Virginia. Barberry has since found its way into protected habitats, state parks, wetlands, and agricultural fields in the state.

The fruit of the invasive Japanese barberry, shown here, ripens from July to October each year.