**Rhamnus frangula** - Glossy Buckthorn or Alder Buckthorn  
(Rhamnaceae)

*Rhamnus frangula* is known almost exclusively for its 2 cultivar forms, prized for their ultra fine-textured foliage, 'Asplenifolia', Fernleaf Buckthorn, or usage as a tall hedge that does not need shearing, 'Columnaris', Tallhedge Buckthorn.

### FEATURES

**Form**
- large foliage shrub for the species form (Glossy Buckthorn) and both cultivars below:  
  - 'Asplenifolia' (Fernleaf Buckthorn) (image to the left) matures at about 12' tall x 10' wide; upright vased growth, becoming upright rounded with age  
  - 'Columnaris' (Tallhedge Buckthorn) (image to the right) matures at about 12' tall x 3' wide; upright columnar growth habit, upright oval with age  
- medium growth rate in youth for all forms, becoming slow with maturity

**Culture**
- partial sun to partial shade for 'Asplenifolia'  
- full sun to partial sun for 'Columnaris'  
- both cultivars perform best in rich, moist, well-drained soils, but are somewhat adaptable to poor soils as long as they have adequate drainage  
- propagated primarily by stem cuttings, although seeds readily germinate  
- Buckthorn Family, with one notable long-term potential pest (root nematodes), one serious cosmetic leaf damage pest (Japanese beetles), and one potential disease (stem cankers, caused by a fungus) commonly available, in both container and B&B forms

**Foliage**
- 'Asplenifolia' (image to the right) has alternate, medium to dark green, deciduous, narrowleaf foliage (about 4" long x 3/8" wide), with an irregular and wavy margin; the foliage canopy as a whole is very fine-textured and ferny in appearance (hence the common name)  
- 'Columnaris' (image below right) has alternate, glossy dark green, obvate to oval, deciduous foliage (about 3" long x 1" wide), with an entire margin, creating a dense canopy when combined with the numerous twisting stems

**Flowers**
- the creamy-green, miniature inflorescences emerge in May from the leaf axils of the new growth and attract numerous bees, but are ornamentally insignificant

**Fruits**
- pendulous berries hang from the leaf axils and undergo a color transition from green to red to black in late summer, maturing in Sept. and devoured by the birds  
- the juicy black berries will stain sidewalks or automobiles nearby as they naturally abscise or are dropped during feeding by the birds

**Twigs**
- thin, gray, and lenticelled, forming V-shaped branches in the vased canopy of 'Asplenifolia', but twisting and curling around themselves in the columnar canopy of 'Columnaris'

**Trunk**
- multi-trunked, with the trunks spreading apart at the base of 'Asplenifolia' into a vased shape, but either upright or girdling each other at the base of 'Columnaris'  
- both cultivars have trunks that become leggy with age (i.e., their lower twigs and foliage die from self-shading with maturity, exposing their "bare legs"), but in the case of 'Columnaris', this is especially noticeable and a great liability due to its normal usage as a visual screen

### USAGE

**Function**
- 'Asplenifolia'- as a specimen or in group plantings  
- 'Columnaris'- in row plantings as an informal hedge

**Texture**
- 'Asplenifolia' has ultra-fine texture and average density in foliage and when bare  
- 'Columnaris' has medium texture and thick density in foliage and when bare

**Assets**
- 'Asplenifolia'- ultra fine-textured "fernleaf" foliage  
- 'Columnaris'- vase-shaped growth habit  
- 'Columnaris'- no shearing is needed to maintain its natural "tall hedge" shape; columnar growth habit

**Liabilities**
- legginess with age  
- abscised juicy fruits will stain any nearby hardscape features or automobiles in late summer  
- nematodes (root-devouring microscopic "worms") and/or yearly Japanese beetle infestations can lead to a severe decline of the shrub  
- poor autumn color

**Habitat**
- Zones 2 to 7  
- the species form (which resembles a more open and spreading form of 'Columnaris') is native to Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa, but has become naturalized (via seed dispersal) in the Eastern U.S.

### SELECTIONS

**Alternates**
- upright shrubs used as unpruned visual screens (Juniperus, Thuja, Viburnum x rhytidophloides)  
- deciduous shrubs with very fine-textured foliage (shrub Willows, including Salix purpurea)  
- evergreen companion shrubs with fine-textured foliage (dwarf shrub members of the following genera: Abies, Chamaecyparis, Juniperus, Picea, Pinus, Taxus, Tsuga)  

**Cultivars – Variants – Related species**

As mentioned throughout the above text:
- 'Asplenifolia' - Fernleaf Buckthorn or Cutleaf Buckthorn - leaves are linear with a wavy margin, fine-textured and eye-catching, vased in growth habit  
- 'Columnaris' - Tallhedge Buckthorn - foliage is oval (like the species form), but its habit is very columnar and it is often used as a tall visual screen to hide utilities or demarcate property lines, or in formal gardens to partition "outdoor rooms", having many twisting stems, crossing branches, and girdling trunks, with legginess becoming a liability with age