

WINTER INTEREST IN THE GARDEN

Traditionally, most of us view autumn cleanup and maintenance activities as a “putting the garden to rest” ritual. Snow falls, and we wait inside for spring to arrive before we begin to admire our gardens once again.

Yet, the truth is that you may be missing out on a rewarding season if you view your garden this way. As Vincent Simeone, author of *Wonder of the Winter Landscape*, writes, “Unlike any other season of the year, winter defines the essence of a garden. It strips away the layers to reveal the garden’s inner soul. Truthfully, there is nothing more enchanting than a garden in winter.”

The great thing is that you don’t have to pick up a shovel or pull a weed during this season. You just need to plan your garden with a vision for how trees, shrubs, perennials, and grasses will look during the winter. Do your planting during the spring, summer, and fall months; then sit back and enjoy your landscape—from a window or wrapped in a warm coat—when the temperatures plummet.

As you approach this idea of winter interest in the garden, it’s important to hold two key concepts in mind: First, you’ll have to envision how a plant, tree, or shrub might look in the winter—under a blanket of snow, a coating of ice, with dead blades of grass, or bare of leaves. Second, be patient. You may buy a cotoneaster at the garden center in June; enjoy its delicate flowers in spring and summer, and patiently await the display of berries in fall and winter.

Vision

While we buy bedding plants and many perennials for their bold, bright colors, planning for winter interest requires another viewpoint. Not only will your winter light levels be softer, but the visual attraction of a winter garden has more to do with shapes, textures, and contrasting colors. Instead of



Bruce Curtis

looking for color, you’ll be searching for combinations of bark, fruit, branches and foliage. (That being said, there are a few plants out there that offer the unexpected pleasure of flowers in winter.)

With deciduous trees and shrubs, which lose their leaves in the winter, think about the actual structure of those plants, sans leaves. Think about branching, bark, texture, and possible fruit. For evergreens, you’ll want to pay attention to texture, foliage and shape. Perennials and ornamental grasses may offer a variety of visual impacts, from tufts of tall golden grass to spindly stalks with seed pods.

As you consider which plants to add to your garden, don’t forget to look at every season of their life cycle, as well, so the plant’s attributes match your garden style spring, summer, fall, and winter. Lastly, don’t forget the well-established trees, shrubs and perennials that may already be part of your garden. Everything from cedar bark to the pine cones of a spruce tree may take on a new meaning now.



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we’ll do the rest.

Plants to go by

The doors are wide open when it comes to plant selection. You can choose from evergreen shrubs or trees, deciduous shrubs or trees, perennials or ornamental grasses (some of which may be perennials, others of which may only be annuals, but they'll still give your garden good interest during the winter months). Breaking it down further, you can specifically search for trees with interesting bark, for ones with colored stems, for berry-producers, seed-pod producers, or winter-flowering plants.

Make sure that your garden offers the right conditions—from soil, to sun/shade to your Hardiness Zone (which may vary by species and variety).

Cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*). White flowers in the spring. In the winter, it has dark, glossy, evergreen leaves. Does best in shade and moist, acidic soil. Hardy Zones 6–8.

Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'). Ornamental grass that grows 4 to 6 ft. tall and has golden feathery flowers in the fall. Provide sun to light shade. Hardy Zones 5–9.

Fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*). Ornamental grass that has pinkish, fuzzy, bottlebrush-like flowers in the fall. It's fountain-like mounded foliage turns to a wheat color in the fall. Needs sun to part shade. Hardy Zones 4–9.

Fragrant wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*). A winter-blooming shrub that has small flowers as early as December. Leaves are dark green in summer and turn greenish yellow in the fall. Adaptable to various growing conditions. Hardy Zones 6–9.

Holly (*Ilex* species). A broadleaf evergreen shrub that peaks in the late autumn when its red berries ripen. Tolerant of various soil/light conditions. There are several different types of holly to choose from, including English, inkberry, blue, American, longstalk and winterberry. Their hardiness ranges from a protected Zone 4 to Zone 10.

Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*). These deciduous trees include varieties such as the coral bark maple, which has bright red stems (Zones 5–8). The cutleaf Japanese maples are known for their twisted, sprawling branches, which create an artsy look in the winter.

Japanese stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamellia*). Has white flowers in the early summer. In the fall, leaves turn crimson red and the bark—multicolored and shaggy—becomes more noticeable. Full sun or partial shade, with acidic soil. Hardy Zones 4–7.

Miscanthus species. Ornamental grass that comes in a variety of heights and colors. Can reach 3 to 7 ft., depending on variety. In the fall, it flowers with plumes or tassels and foliage turns tannish red, white, or silver. Hardy Zones 5–9.

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). Shrub. Flowers in the spring. Dark, evergreen leaves. Tolerates a wide range of growing conditions. Hardy Zones 4–9.

Pieris (*Pieris japonica*). A popular flowering shrub that blooms in early spring. But you'll see flower buds develop in winter and dangle down. Dark, evergreen leaves. Grows in moist, acidic soil and partial shade. Hardy Zones 5–7.

Pussy willow (*Salix* species). This shrub has soft, fuzzy flowers called catkins in late winter. Prefers moist soil and full or part sun. Hardy Zones 4–8.

Red switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*). Ornamental grass that forms a 3-ft.-high upright clump. Has finely textured reddish sprays in the fall, and its leaves turn red in the fall, also. Full sun. Hardy Zones 3–9.

Rhododendrons. Shrub. Flowers in the spring and summer. In the winter, they offer lush, evergreen foliage. Need moist, acidic soil and partial shade. Hardy Zones 4–7.

Spring heath (*Erica carnea*). Groundcover that flowers in the late winter or early spring. Foliage is finely textured. Needs moist, acidic soil and sun or partial shade. Hardy Zones 5–7.

Tufted sedge (*Carex elata*). An ornamental grass that typically grows 2 ft. tall and provides winter interest. Prefers shade/part shade. Hardy Zones 5–8.

Viburnum (*Viburnum* species). Shrub. Flowers in spring, and has dark-green foliage through the summer. In the fall, leaves turn deep red, yellow or maroon, and bright-red berries develop. Linden viburnum grows in Zones 5–7; American cranberrybush types in Zones 2–7; European cranberrybush types in Zones 3–8.

Witch hazel (*Hamamelis* species). While common witch hazel blooms in the fall, the Asian species and hybrids bloom in the winter. The dark-green leaves turn to yellow, orange and red in the fall, and witch hazel typically has a very wide habit. Hardy Zones 5–8.

Winter honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*). This medium-sized shrub blooms in late winter and early spring with white flowers noted for their fragrance. Tolerates a wide range of growing conditions and prefers full sun or partial shade. Leaves will fall in unusually cold winters but most of the foliage usually stays throughout the winter. Hardy Zones 4–8.

Winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*). A low-growing winter-blooming shrub that has yellow flowers from mid to late winter into early spring. Sports small, green leaves from spring until fall and has a cascading habit. Adaptable to a range of growing conditions. Hardy Zones 6–10. ♣

By Jennifer Duffield White, with special thanks to Vincent A. Simeone, author of Wonders of the Winter Landscape (available from www.ballbookshelf.com)