

Winter Landscape Analysis

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Much is revealed without leaves and flowers.

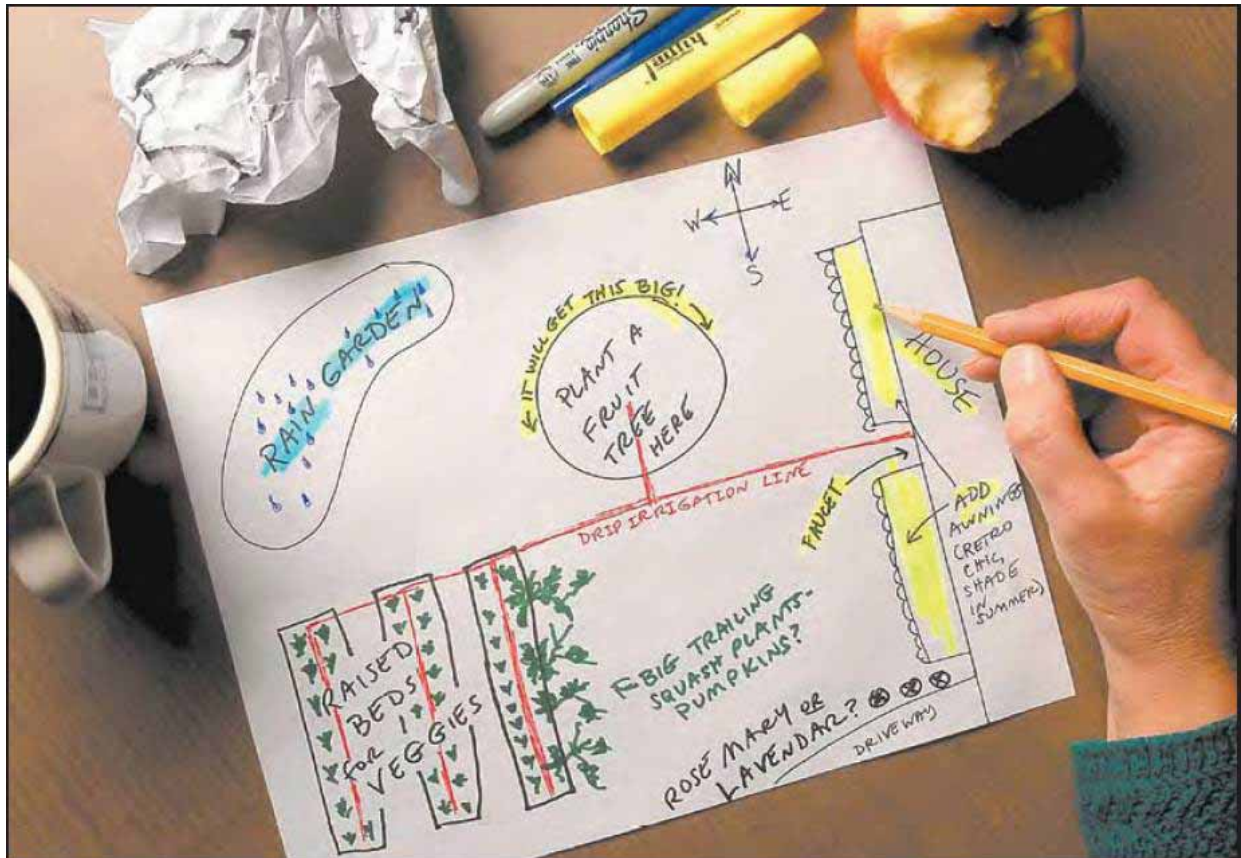
One of winter's many gifts is the way dormant plants unwrap the basic structure, or "bones," of a garden. Without leaves, the deciduous trees and shrubs become wiry sculptures. Look at all the space revealed in those places where the perennials bloomed and vegetables grew their bounty! The shapes of individual trees and shrubs, and the colors of leafless plants and evergreens take on new clarity.

Often we see our gardens simply in terms of the spring and summer blossoms, foliage that drops in the fall, and branches that require thinning or pruning. Winter opens up your view of the garden in a new way, providing a chance to assess the general shape of your landscape. But there's more to see, at least potentially, than brown branches and mulch or cover crops where the annual plants (flowers and vegetables that grow and die in one season.) With a little research and effort, you can choose plants to add "winter interest" to the garden, with shapes and colors that appear only after leaves fall in autumn – and even fragrant flowering shrubs that bloom only in winter. What a delight to have perfumed blossoms amidst winter's grays and browns!

Early winter is an ideal time to look carefully at the shapes in your garden. Do you like the design you see? Is this the look you want to create and the plants you want to enjoy? Formal gardens tend to be designed with straight lines and angles. Informal gardens tend to be shaped by curves and soft outlines. Regardless of which style you prefer, winter brings out the lines dividing planting beds, shrubs, trees, pathways, etc. This is a good time to re-cut existing edges, add new borders and edges. You can also use this opportunity to dig up unused areas of lawn, or rearrange smaller plantings and redesign dull or uninteresting areas, and remove unused lawn or smother it with cardboard and at least 6" of mulch. Start with defining the edges in your garden and selecting areas where you want to emphasize winter interest.

At the time that uninteresting areas reveal themselves, you can begin the creative process of garden design. When an area needs redesigning, first consider the size of the plant(s) for that area (full grown size, that is. Be patient; if the plant establishes well, it will reach its full height and width in due time.) Remember to consider how much light, shade and water reach the area, and choose your plants accordingly.

What shapes will most enhance the area? The shape of the plant can be tall and cylindrical, short and round, rectangular or free-flowing depending on the area, but it must fit well in the space. Cascading shapes, zigzagging limbs and contorted branches are wonderful elements provided by some deciduous plants when their unique forms show up in winter. When their leaves are gone and the garden is dormant, these plants add visual excitement.



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald *Winter is planning time for landscapes and gardens.*

This is an excellent time to plant shrubs and trees. Always water a new planting. This helps the roots settle into their new home, and eliminates air pockets that could dry them out. Then relax as winter's rains continue to water the new plantings. Plant a dormant tree or shrub in the winter – it will awaken in springtime, already well on its way to getting established. If you chose a fragrant winter-blooming shrub, plant it near your door or walkway so you will be delighted every time you walk by. These are not plants to be admired at a distance! But others add visual variety that can also be enjoyed from afar.

Evergreens come in wonderful shapes and colors that include shades of blue, lime green, gold, variegated and deep green. The shiny leaves of some broad-leaf evergreens take on a reddish hue in winter. In addition to their color, evergreens offer a wide variety of sizes. Choose from dozens of varieties of conifers (conifer – cone-like seed pod) from compact to large, conical to free-flowing.

Some evergreen plants bring golden highlights to the otherwise brown and grey winter landscape. Some deciduous trees and shrubs reveal a new level of beauty in winter. Your winter landscape will not be dull when bare branches form fantastical, contorted shapes, or glow with red or golden bark.

There is a wealth of shapes, sizes and colors to choose from that will enhance a winter landscape. A combination of deciduous plants, broad-leaf plants and conifers will provide years of beauty in the winter season. Lucky for you, early winter is an excellent time to plant, and a great way to

break in those new garden boots and tools you received as holiday gifts. Creating some winter interest in your garden is a gift you will enjoy for many winters to come.

February is the time of year for buying inexpensive bare root trees and shrubs at area nurseries. Next week we'll learn how help these new plantings get established in your yard, and why you shouldn't wait for good weather - bundle up and plant before winter's done!



Photo courtesy oregonstate.edu / Red Osier Dogwood adds flares of color to your landscape year round

A FEW TREES WITH UNIQUE SHAPES OR COLORS:

Contorted mulberry (M. bombycis 'Unryu') grows to 25'

Contorted robinia (Robinia pseudoacacia "Tortuosa") grows 10 – 15'

Harry Lauder's Walking Stick (Corylus avellana 'Contorta') 10 – 15'

Japanese maples (acer palmatum) many varieties have red or coral bark

A FEW EVERGREEN SHRUBS:

Rhododendrens: Leucothoe 'Scarletta', Japanese andromeda PJM

Conifers: Sivler Mist Himalayan Cedar (Cedrus deodara)

Globe Blue Spruce (Picea pungens) 'Glauca' forms a perfect pyramid

SHRUBS:

Red Osier Dogwood (Cornus stolonifera) to 15' deep red branches

Flaviramea (cultivar of Red Osier Dogwood) – golden yellow branches

Witch Hazel (Hamamelis vernalis) to 20' – highly fragrant flowers January – February

Winter-flowering Daphne (Daphne odora) – to 4', intensely fragrant flowers February - March

AN EVERGREEN ORNAMENTAL GRASS AND A GROUNDCOVER:

'Kaga-nishiki' (C. dolichostachya) 'Golden Fountains'

'Carmel Ceanothus' – variegated groundcover, green leaves with yellow, to 1' tall

RESOURCES

- 'Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest,' Arthur R. Kruckeberg, Prof. Emeritus, U of WA
- Great Plant Picks: <http://greatplantpicks.org/program.php?page=home> Winter Flowering Shrubs, Joan Helbacka, King Co. Master Gardener
- 'Gardening in Western Washington' <http://gardening.wsu.edu/column/11-10-02.htm>
- 'Ornamental Grasses' WSU Clark County Extension: http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/OrnamentalGrass3.html