

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Several years ago, when I moved to the Pacific Northwest I looked at the beauty of the landscape and realized that I had come to a gardener's paradise. In my gardener's enthusiasm, I envisioned spring and summer flowers everywhere but, after several winters I also concluded that gardening here is full of exciting possibilities in winter, too. The climate, which nurtures such a large variety of plants, is created from warm, moist westerly winds moving off the vast Pacific Ocean. The result is a maritime climate that is generous with rainfall and moderate in temperatures. With careful planning and plant selection, winter gardens can produce color, texture and flowers throughout the cold months and short days of November through March.

In fact, it is the cold weather and short days that are responsible for enhancing the color in many shrubs that are the heart of the winter garden. One of my favorites is PJM rhododendron. Although covered in purplish/pink flowers in late winter and green and dense in summer, the winter foliage is a glossy mahogany. It grows to 4 feet and is tolerant of heat and occasional drought, but its special winter color makes it a wonderful addition to the winter landscape. A small ground covering plant that also takes on color in the winter is wintergreen (Gaultheria procumbens) that in the cold weather turns from green to glowing bronze.

Among the many shrubs that flower in winter, a colorful addition is the December flowering Camellia sasanqua. Both the red variety 'Crimson King' and the white 'Narumi-gata' produce flowers and perfume. Their leaves remain a glossy green year round but they do need a site that protects them from excessive wind. Another candidate for the winter garden, the winter flowering viburnum (Viburnum x bodnantense), flowers on leafless red stems for a dramatic effect in the winter landscape. The leaves emerge after flowering. No winter garden should be without the unique, zigzag pattern of witch hazel (Hamamelis) that produces red to yellow blooms along its bare stems in the depth of winter. The perennials that reward the winter gardener include the hellebores. The most popular variety is commonly known as Christmas rose (H. niger). Snow drops (Galanthus), iris stylosa (I. unguicularis) and cyclamen (C. coum) are among the most reliable perennials for our climate and introduce subtle blues, pinks and white to the landscape.

The role of texture is an especially exciting part of winter garden planning and selection. Few plants are more reliable or attractive than cool weather ornamental grasses. Among the loveliest is blue fescue (Festuca glauca) that grows in compact, small, blue sprays. For a larger variety, choose blue oat grass (Avena sempervirens) which grows up to 2-3 feet in a fountain-shaped clump. Its blue color is a lovely addition to the natural evergreens so common in the northwest landscape at all times of the year but very welcome in the cooler months. An example of an ornamental grass garden can be seen at the WSU Master Gardener Discovery Garden in Mount Vernon. Many of the varieties grown there are winter hardy.

Creating winter appeal in the garden is exciting and rewarding. Given the special nature of our climate, this unique opportunity for year-round beauty is readily available.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.