

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: Nov. 6, 2005
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It is with the onset of winter that the basic structure, or “bones” of a garden are revealed. The loss of leaves from deciduous trees and shrubs and the dying back of flowering plants, open up the look of the garden in a new way. It is at this time of year that the shape of individual trees and shrubs and the color of leafless plants and evergreens take on new interest. Planning for winter gardens is an exciting prospect in the Pacific Northwest where tolerant winter weather supports a wide variety of plants.

Early winter is an ideal time to look carefully at how the lines in your garden reflect 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 designed with curves and soft outlines. Regardless of which style a gardener prefers, winter enhances the lines that divide lawn from flowerbeds and shrubs. Re-cutting existing edges, cutting new borders and redefining edges, as well as rearranging smaller plantings and generally redesigning dull or uninteresting areas of the garden is especially rewarding now. Start with defining the edges in your garden and selecting areas where you want to emphasize winter interest.

Early winter is also an excellent time to plant shrubs and trees. At the time that dull and uninteresting areas reveal themselves, the gardener can begin the creative process of garden design. Shrubs, trees and perennials that will contribute to an exciting winter garden come in endless shapes and sizes. When an area needs redesigning, two basic questions need to be answered: first, what is the size of the plants that the area will need and what shapes will most enhance the area? Start with plants that will grow to an appropriate size as they mature. Check carefully when selecting so that a plant’s final size is clearly in your mind when you buy. The shape of the plant can be tall and cylindrical or short and round or 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 selections for deciduous plants because their unique forms show up in winter. When their leaves are gone and the garden is dormant, these plants add visual excitement. Some suggestions for wonderful plant shapes that are literally contorted include: contorted mulberry (M. bombycis ‘Unryu’) which grows to 25 feet, contorted robinia (Robinia pseudoacacia “Tortuosa”) which grows between 10 and 15 feet or Harry Lauder’s Walking Stick (Corylus avellana ‘Contorta’) which grows to under 10 feet. Other contorted varieties become available every year and local nurseries are generally a very good source of the newest specimens.

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. Leucothoe ‘Scarletta’, Japanese andromeda and PJM rhododendron are three examples. In addition to their color, evergreens offer a wide variety of sizes. Dozens of conifers can be found that are small and compact or large, conical and free-flowing (like Cedrus deodara) or Picea pungens ‘Glauca’ which is dense and forms a perfect pyramid.

There are 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 and early winter is an excellent time to plant.

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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 Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
