

# Winter Flowering Shrubs

By Valerie Jean Rose

November 5, 2010



## **Fragrant winter flowers give senses an aromatic lift during the cold months.**

Flowers don't bloom outside in the winter – that's what I learned growing up on family's midwestern farm. True, we did enjoy lovely flowers in the living room when Mom forced paperwhite or amaryllis bulbs into bloom. (Poinsettias don't count, those red 'petals' are actually leaves, not flowers!) But outside our warm house, from November to March, the frosty landscape ranged from browns to grays and snowy white, brightened by some evergreens and occasional red berries. When city folks talked of their vacations in Hawaii, I imagined an abundance of trees vines and flowers, far from frozen soil and brittle winds.

Here in the Skagit Valley, winter flowers are not a distant dream. Precipitation here doesn't have to be shoveled, though it can be stored in rainbarrels and filtered in rain gardens. With a bit of planning and planting, flowers can grace our gardens flowers all winter. "Winter-flowering shrubs tend to have flowers that are long-lasting," notes Neil Bell, home horticulturist with the Oregon State University Extension Service. "Many of these have the additional advantage of being sweetly-scented, the perfect antidote to the winter blahs."

Winter-blooming herbaceous plants include the smaller hardy cyclamens. *Cyclamen cilicium* features fragrant, dainty pink flowers and strikingly variegated leaves. They enjoy a shady location. In summer they go dormant, disappearing completely. Be careful to mark where you plant them, to avoid damaging the tuber or disturbing the roots.

## **SWEET-SMELLING SHRUBS**

Some of the most fragrant shrubs bloom in winter. Plant them where you can easily walk by to inhale the gift of floral scent. Why slog through wet grass to enjoy this treat?

*Daphne odora* or 'Winter Daphne' is a lovely evergreen shrub, growing to about 4' tall. Small, rosy purple, intensely fragrant flowers appear in February and March. A shorter variety, *Daphne cneorum* is often called 'Rock Daphne' for its use in rockeries. *Daphne retusa* is another nice dwarf variety of evergreen Daphne. Both grow up to 1'. Some varieties bloom in the spring rather than the winter, so choose what time of year you want to enjoy this combination of blooms and scents.

*Hamamelis mollis*, or Chinese witch hazel, is a somewhat slow growing deciduous shrub which can eventually become a small tree. Golden yellow flowers bloom on bare wood January to March. They have a very spicy fragrance. *Hamamelis intermedia* (a cross between *H. mollis* and a Japanese witch hazel) blooms at the same time, but has varieties with orange, copper and deep red flowers. What a lovely dash of color in a pale pastel winter landscape!

Both *Sarcococca ruscifolia* (4-6' tall) or *S. hookerana humilis* (1-1/2' at maturity) have tiny whitish flowers, almost hidden in the foliage, in January and February. Commonly called 'Fragrant Sweetbox,' the blooms smell like honey! These shrubs will grow in deep shade.

The many winter-blooming Viburnums tolerate a wide range of soil conditions, growing well in sun or part shade. *Viburnum x bodnantense* is large, growing to 10' or more. These northwest natives produce clusters of small pink, very fragrant flowers on bare wood, often through the winter. *Viburnum burkwoodii*, usually evergreen, features very fragrant white flowers from February to March. *Viburnum tinus*, an evergreen is available in varieties ranging in size from small tree to low-growing shrub. Clusters of pink buds open into white, lightly fragrant flowers from November through the winter.

### PLANT THEM WHERE YOU CAN ENJOY THEM

Gardeners usually plan a landscape based on colors, shapes and heights – the visual display of plants, rocks, fences or garden art. The focus is on what you see, rarely on what you smell. Consider the following places:

- Near front and back doors.
- Along paths leading to a shed, greenhouse, mailbox or compost bin – places you will frequently walk.
- Next to a sidewalk or driveway.

There is little point in placing scented winter flowering shrubs a long way from the house in places you are unlikely to visit on bleak winter days. Position your aromatic treasures wisely and you will enjoy them most when the damp winter air is graced with floral scent.



*Viburnum tinus* 'Spirit' adds color to a winter garden with dainty flowers and vibrant red branches. **Photo by Valerie Rose.**



The tiny chartreuse flowers on this Witch Hazel look like crinkled leaves. Many varieties bring delicate fragrance to the winter garden. **Photo by Valerie Rose.**

### More Fragrant Winter Flowering Shrubs

- *Lonicera fragrantissima*, a bushy, spreading honeysuckle with highly perfumed creamy-white flowers from winter to early spring.
- *Sarcococca ruscifolia* (Christmas box) is a mounded evergreen. Its tiny white flowers scent the slightest breeze.

- Mahonia x media 'Charity' starts displaying fragrant yellow flowers in November, with buds opening over many weeks.
- Clematis armandii is a vigorous, scented, evergreen climber, bearing saucer-shaped, white flowers.
- Chimonanthus praecox (wintersweet) carries small waxy blooms, pale yellow outside and brownish purple inside.



Camillias brighten Northwest gardens for months, blooming from November to February. John Christianson of Christianson's Nursery enjoys the shell-pink blossoms of a Camilla sasahqua, 'Jean May.' **Photo by Valerie Rose.**

## RESOURCES

- 'Winter blooming flowers can brighten cold gray days,' Carol Savonen, Oregon State University Extension Service:  
[http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?S\\_No=707&storyType=garden](http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?S_No=707&storyType=garden)
- 'Winter Flowering Shrubs,' Joan Helbacka, King County Master Gardener,  
<http://gardening.wsu.edu/column/11-01-98.htm>
- 'Great Shrubs for the Pacific Northwest,'  
[http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm\\_tips/GreatShrubs.html](http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/GreatShrubs.html)
- 'The Plant List',  
[www.savingwater.org/docs/plantlist.pdf](http://www.savingwater.org/docs/plantlist.pdf)