

Holiday Plants that Last

By Melinda Mann
December 12, 2008

As the season of giving approaches, try a hardy-plant gift that brings yearly winter cheer.

When people tell stories about their gardens, many reveal that their most treasured plants are those they received as gifts. An outdoor plant for the avid gardener makes a great gift any time hardy plant with vivid colors is particularly special. Plants with rich foliage, berries and flowers can brighten a winter landscape year after year, as well as attracting bees and other insects to help with early spring pollination of other flowers. Here in the Skagit Valley, you may be surprised at the number of interesting winter plants from which we may choose.

To find the right gift for the gardener on your list, your best choices will probably come from a local nursery where plants are kept outside. Flowering plants grown in greenhouses and shipped to a retailer may look great now, but they are often spring or summer-blooming varieties that will not add much to the garden next winter. In the nursery, start by looking for eye-catching foliage. Many small blueberry and azalea varieties, for example, have striking red bark and leaves in winter, as well as fruit or flowers during the warmer months. Boxwoods, firs and pines offer a range of green foliage and often are available as small plants this time of year.

Many other winter beauties are cold-hardy plants that can be grown either in containers or planted permanently in the ground. A few that are available locally include:

Spurges (*Euphorbia*): Though the most popular and splashy species of *Euphorbia*, the Poinsettia, generally won't survive outside in our climate, it has many lovely, cold-hardy relatives that will. Evergreen varieties such as Glacier Blue, Blackbird, and Shorty are grown commercially in the Skagit Valley and provide exotic foliage ranging from variegated blue-gray, to dark purple, to green with bright-red tips. In late winter to very early spring, these spurges produce bursts of bell-shaped green or yellow flowers (see photo), creating a cheerful display.



Evergreen varieties of *Euphorbia*, such as *Euphorbia characias* 'Glacier Blue,' above, provide exotic foliage and bursts of bell-shaped flowers in late winter to very early spring. Photo courtesy of Skagit Gardens.

Hellebores: Hellebores are among the most popular winter-blooming plants. They are easy to grow, low-maintenance shrubs with midwinter or early spring clusters of nodding, cup-shaped flowers. Varieties include the Lenten Rose (*Helleborus orientalis*), whose flowers range from white to plum; the Christmas Rose (*Helleborus niger*), whose white blossoms actually appear here in February; the Corsican Hellebore (*Helleborus argutifolius*) pictured here as the ‘Winter’s Grace’ variety; and the Stinking or Palm Leaf Hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*), named for its pungent odor when crushed, which produces maroon-edged, pale green flowers.



Hellebores are among the most popular winter-blooming plants. The easy-to-grow, low-maintenance shrubs, such as this *Helleborus argutifolius* ‘Winter’s Grace,’ come alive with midwinter or early spring clusters of nodding, cup-shaped flowers. Photo courtesy of Skagit Gardens.

Decorative berries: Tea berries, wintergreen or creeping winter berries (*Gaultheria procumbens*) flower in the summer, then leave behind festive red berries against a background of green leaves throughout the fall and into winter. If you want a plant that is sure to evoke holiday warmth and tradition, this one is irresistible! The downside is that even though they love cool weather, they are best kept in containers unless they can be grown in a perfect spot with shade, perpetual moisture and excellent drainage. Easier to grow are Snowberry bushes (*Symphoricarpos albus*), which, like tea berries, blossom in summer. During winter they provide elegant clusters of creamy berries on otherwise bare branches. It’s worth noting, especially if giving a gift to a home with small children, that neither of these berries are edible and can be poisonous.

Heathers: The right mix of heathers can provide a gardener with nearly year-round blossoms. When well-established in slightly acidic, loamy, moist soil, heathers are very hardy and easy to care for. They also work wonderfully as part of a container mix. Winter-blooming heathers (*Erica carnea*) are slow-growing plants with soft pink to rich mauve flowers that will sometimes bloom even through snow. But some summer heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) varieties such as Blazeaway also capture attention in winter because of their brightly-hued foliage.

Whether you are buying an outdoor plant or a houseplant, there are a few tips to follow to make sure your gift remains in excellent condition. Remember that most plants are sensitive to temperature. Exposures to extremes or widely varying environments can cause harmful effects—including killing the plant. So, bring plants home as soon as possible from the nursery where you buy them—don’t let them sit in your car on a cold day and then bring them into your warm home. For outdoor plants, keep them in a cool place, such as a garage or a porch, and when giving the gift, remind the person that while it can be enjoyed for a few days inside the house, it should be transitioned back—again, into a garage or cool setting—within a week or so and then put outside.

Also, when purchasing a plant to be replanted outside, make sure you get the information about its needs for space, sun, water and any other special considerations. Finally, make sure that while you have the plant, you care for it according to its needs and keep it well watered. If all goes well, next winter your friend’s garden will be a little cheerier, thanks to your thoughtfulness.