

Color in the Winter Garden

By Marsha Goller
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A different kind of color experience

We gardeners need a winter pick me up if we live in the Skagit Valley. Our winters are cold, wet and mostly cloudy. Temperatures are rarely below 25°F with an average daily high below 51°F, but it is the clouds, the dark and the wet that tend to get us down. The rainy season lasts 6.4 months, from October 11 to April 24 with a greater than 34% chance of at least .04 inches of precipitation on any given day during that time. The shortest day of the year is December 21 with only 8 hours and 19 minutes of daylight. Add the rain, the clouds and the short days together, and we need some color to brighten our days.

Even with the wet and dark, we are fortunate to be able to plan for color in our winter garden. It takes a bit more focus and paying attention to plan for winter color. It also takes a bit of readjusting to our thinking. Everything has color. Brown, gray, green and even black are all colors. They can even be striking colors. We often just need some contrasting pops of color to draw our attention to the beauty and interest in the garden.

The structure (the bones or framework) of the garden is exposed in winter and is not hidden by lush and colorful plantings. Paths, walks, hedges, sculpture and location of trees all take on new meaning in the winter garden. This is also true of the plants themselves as the bark, the shape of the trees and shrubs, the lingering blossoms or blades of grasses and the seed pods all contribute either beauty or drabness to the winter garden.

It's important to think about which plants keep their beauty of leaf, berry or flower through the winter and how it shows up in its location in the garden.

To see color and beauty in the winter garden, we need to consider looking at four visuals always present in our garden. These often look different or take on a different perspective in the winter: bark, foliage, flower and fruit or berry.

Many plants are multi-season plants having year-round interest. Others disappear in winter so we need to think about what we see when they are not present. Other plants call our attention to different aspects of the plant during different seasons.

An example of a multi-seasonal plant is *Acer palmatum* 'Sango Kaku', the coral bark maple, with its gorgeous leaves bursting forth on red twigs in the spring. During the summer, we hardly notice the bark which has dulled under the canopy of leaves. Fall brings the changing of color, bright and beautiful. It is not until the leaves begin to fall that we again notice the exquisite shape of the actual tree and the quickly reddening bark, especially on the tips. Even on a dark day, the coral bark shines forth.



Flowers with multiple colors make a vibrant contribution to a winter garden. *Photo by Marsha Goller / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

A. griseum, or paper bark maple, has highly ornamental, peeling orange-cinnamon bark that stands out beautifully in the winter landscape. *Betula papyrifera*, paper birch, with its peeling white bark is another standout in the winter garden.

Some plants get our attention in winter with their gorgeous winter foliage. Variations of green in the foliage of evergreen trees can be a wonderful invitation to the world of color. *Cryptomeria*, or Japanese cedar, is a striking evergreen whose outer needles change color with the advent of cooler weather.

C. japonica ‘Sekkan-sugi’ will light up your garden with its bright yellow winter needles. *C. japonica* ‘Black Dragon’ changes its outer needles to a deep burgundy or mahogany. It is amazing how many broad-leaved evergreens are available to us as well as the more traditional needled evergreens.

There are many varieties of *Hebe* but ‘Silver Dollar’ with its grey variegated leaves and raspberry red tips in winter is worth consideration.

Pieris japonica, or lily-of-the-valley shrub, has pinkish red flower buds that are present on the bush from fall until they burst into bloom in late winter.

Sarcococca ruscifolia, or fragrant sweetbox, is a definite multi-season shrub with tiny fragrant white flowers starting in early January with red berries that turn black in the fall. Another winter-flowering plant, *Viburnum bodnantense*, or pink dawn viburnum, is a must-have if you crave spring-like beauty in the middle of winter.



Left: Shrubs of all sizes can make a colorful contribution to a garden in winter. **Above:** A variety of plants and shrubs can make a winter garden vibrant and enticing. *Photos by Marsha Goller / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Callicarpa bodinieri, or profusion beautyberry, is an excellent example of a plant bearing berries in winter. This bush with its open arching branches is loaded with clusters of glowing purple berries that last through the winter.

It's hard to imagine a winter garden here in the valley without *Helleborus*, or hellebore, also known as Christmas or Lenten rose. Their bloom time varies from November to March by variety. It is best to purchase hellebores while they are in bloom to get the color and bloom time you prefer.

Plants with winter color and form are worth searching for at your local garden nurseries. They cheer you up all winter, encouraging you to look beyond the dark and rainy skies to find new sources of color from the red stems of the peonies just sprouting, to the rhubarb peeking through, to the surprises of seeing primroses blooming through frost and snow. There are so many choices! We can learn to take advantage of a different kind of color experience in our winter gardens that brings a unique beauty that is not at all drab or colorless.

RESOURCES:

- *The Garden in Winter*, by Rosemary Verey 1988, Frances Lincoln Limited
<http://www.greatplantpicks.org/>
- <https://weatherspark.com>