

Winter Gardens

By Jessamyn Tuttle
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No reason for your garden to take the winter off

In February in the Northwest it can feel as though spring will never come. Many gardens are designed to dazzle in spring and summer, becoming gray and dull once the leaves fall and the last flowers fade. But with a little planning ahead, our gardens can be full of color and fragrance all year round. In fact, February is a perfect time to walk around your garden and think about what could be done to make next winter more interesting. Even if it's covered in snow, this is a chance to see the "bones" of your garden, and decide where you could add trees, plants with color or texture, or even garden sculpture or furniture.

Fragrant plants can really shine at this time of year. On a mild day in midwinter, the gorgeous vanilla smell of sweet box (*Sarcococca spp.*) can fill the air. The flowers are small and not at all showy, sprinkled along the branches of a small evergreen shrub, but the fragrance more than makes up for its looks. Plant drought-tolerant sweet box along your foundation or sprinkled through your flower borders, where its shiny leaves will complement summer flowers. Fragrance also comes from *Viburnum*, especially *Viburnum x bodnantense* "Dawn." Covered in pink flowers that emerge through the darkest part of winter, this shrub produces an intense spicy smell.

For color in the garden, shrubs and trees with colorful berries are a great option, such as bright red winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) or barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), white snowberries (*Symphoricarpos albus*), or brilliant purple beautyberry (*Callicarpa*). Berries and crabapples also provide food for wild birds.

A classic flowering shrub for the winter garden is *Hamamelis x intermedia*, or witch hazel. Most cultivars begin to show their tassels of red, yellow or orange along bare branches in late December, coming into full bloom in January and early February, and many are intensely fragrant. 'Jelena' is a particularly pretty variety with its coppery flowers, but 'Diane' offers a rich red color that shines in snow. Winter hazel (*Corylopsis*), a completely different species, also has beautiful late winter flowers.

As January takes hold, snowdrops (*Galanthus spp.*) begin to appear, sometimes actually coming up through a snowdrift. *G. nivalis* "Flore Pleno" is an unusual double flowered variety of the common snowdrop, while *G. elwesii*, the giant snowdrop, has flowers up to 2 inches long. Since, like most bulbs, their foliage dies back completely in the summer, you can fill your garden with snowdrops without affecting your summer garden design. Winter aconite (*Eranthus hyemalis*), a

buttercup relative, is a nice complement to snowdrops, producing bright yellow flowers low to the ground.

Hellebores (*Helleborus spp.*) are an amazing perennial for our climate. Some bloom as early as December, while others start to put bloom stalks up in January and February, and the variety of colors and patterns is endless. From pale green or white with violet freckles to deepest purple, they can light up a dark corner of the garden or provide a dramatic accent in a frost proof pot. Many newly developed hybrids are especially attractive, with double blossoms and frills in beautiful color combinations. A heavy frost may cause the flowers to lay flat on the ground, but they usually rise back up with the thaw. In some cases, a prolonged cold period or heavy wind will damage stems, in which case the flowers can be cut and floated in a bowl of water indoors.



Ornamental grasses are often cut down as part of fall cleanup but can provide attractive texture to the winter garden as well as food for wild birds. *Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Of all winter blooming plants, hardy *Cyclamen* is one of the best, yet least used. While *Cyclamen hederifolium* puts up both leaves and flowers in autumn, with just the leaves remaining through winter, *Cyclamen coum* puts out patterned leaves ranging from deep green to pale silver in late autumn but waits until January to produce a carpet of tiny flowers in pink and white. Hardy *Cyclamen* are tough as nails, resistant to frost and pests, and will spread by root and seed to

create a delicate groundcover, politely fading back into dormancy in time for other plants to explode into growth in springtime.



The nodding flowers of hellebores can be cut and floated in water for a beautiful indoor floral display. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

And of course, winter interest does not have to mean flowers! Use of evergreen plants like conifers, *Rhododendrons* or ferns keeps the garden looking fresh, and planting trees with beautiful bark like paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) or river birch (*Betula nigra*) gives interest the entire winter. Some shrubs like red twig dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*, especially the cultivar “Midwinter Fire”) have incredibly brilliant new growth. Heaths and heathers are evergreen as well as offering both foliage color and flowers in the winter. While many gardeners cut down their ornamental grasses in late fall as part of their garden cleanup, these can be left standing until spring for wonderful texture in the garden, plus providing food and habitat for birds and beneficial insects.

No matter how long or dark the season, a little planning ahead can mean that there is no reason for your garden to take the winter off.

RESOURCES:

- Creating Winter Interest, Chicago Botanic Garden https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/creating_winter_interest
- Top 10 plants for winter interest, Cambridge University Botanic Garden <https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/gardens-plantings/winter-garden/top-10-plants-for-winter-interest/>
- Great Plant Picks <https://www.greatplantpicks.org/plantlists>
- Missouri Botanical Garden <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx>