

Color in the Winter Garden

By Marsha Goller
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Many options can make your garden burst with color

Skagit Valley gardeners definitely need a winter color blast. We are already seeing the leaves changing colors, then dropping to the ground, leaving bare branches. Our annuals are mostly on their last drooping legs. The majority of perennials are way past their peak color for this year. The dark is encroaching. On January 19, the cloudiest day of the year, the sky is overcast 73% of the time and clear, mostly clear or partly cloudy 27% of the 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.

We are fortunate to live in the Pacific Northwest where, even in winter, we can choose to add color to our gardens that will brighten our days. It does take 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 color pops to draw our attention to the beauty and interest in the garden.

The structure of the garden, the bones or framework, is exposed in winter and is not hidden by lush and colorful plantings. Paths, walks, hedges, sculpture, location of trees all take on new meaning in the winter garden. This is true of the plants themselves as bark, the shape of the trees and shrubs, the lingering blossoms or blades of grasses, and the seed pods can all contribute to striking beauty in the winter garden. We can learn to look carefully for previously unseen beauty in the leaf, berry or flower remaining through the winter. There are some real surprises waiting for you if you look carefully!

To see color and beauty in the winter garden we can consider looking at four visuals always present in our garden, but that often look different or take on a different perspective in the winter. These are bark, foliage, flower and fruit or berry. Many plants are multi-season plants having year-round interest. Others disappear in winter and 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.

The *Acer palmatum* 'Sango Kaku', more commonly known as coral bark maple, has 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 really dark day, the

coral bark shines forth. *Acer griseum* or paper bark maple, has highly ornamental, peeling orange-cinnamon bark that stands out beautifully in the winter landscape. The red twig dogwood, *Cornus alba*, has long been grown for its intensely red or yellow bark in winter.



Coral Bark Maple. Photo by Marsha Goller / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

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. *Cryptomeria japonica* ‘Sekkan-sugi’ will light up your garden with its bright yellow winter needles and *Cryptomeria japonica* ‘Black Dragon’ changes its outer needles to a deep burgundy or mahogany. The striking Dwarf Hinoki Cypress makes a visual statement any time of year. A favorite example is the *Chamaecyparis obtuse* ‘Nana Lutea.’ It has golden-yellow fan-shaped foliage in overlapping layers with green interior foliage.

It is amazing how many broad-leaved evergreens are available to us as well as the more traditional needled evergreens. There are a number of varieties of *Hebe*, but *Hebe* ‘Silver Dollar’ with its grey variegated leaves and young tips that turn bright raspberry red in winter is worth looking into. *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.

There are a number of winter-flowering plants that thrive in our Skagit Valley climate. The *Viburnum bodnantense* ‘Pink Dawn’ or ‘Pink Dawn Viburnum’ is a must have if you crave spring-like beauty in the middle of winter. This small tree features lovely pink blooms with a gentle fragrance anytime from August to April.

Winter-blooming heaths can bloom almost all winter and definitely add a bright spot of color to the garden.



Pink Dawn Viburnum. Photo by Marsha Goller / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

It's hard to imagine a winter garden here in the valley without the hellebores, often known as Christmas or Lenten rose. Their bloom time varies from November to March by variety. It is recommended that the best time to visit nurseries and purchase hellebore plants is while they are in bloom. That way, it's possible to get the color and bloom time you prefer.

Sarcococca ruscifolia or 'fragrant sweetbox' is a definite multi-season shrub with tiny fragrant white flowers starting in early January and turning to red berries that turn black in the fall. Speaking of berries in winter, we have to mention beauty berry or *Calliparpa bodinieri* 'profusion'. This bush with its open arching branches is loaded with clusters of glowing purple berries that last through the winter. It's truly an eye-catcher.

Plants with winter color and form are worth searching for at your local garden nurseries. They can cheer us up all winter, encouraging all of us to look beyond the dark and rainy

skies to find new sources of color in the garden, from the red stems of the peonies just sprouting, to the rhubarb peeking through, to the surprise of seeing primroses blooming through the frost and even the snow. There are so many choices and we can learn to take advantage of a different kind of color experience in our winter gardens that bring a unique beauty that is not at all drab or colorless.

RESOURCES:

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