

Plants for the Winter Garden

Take a look outside. Fall's bright colors have faded away, and the garden is quiet and restful. The leaves have fallen, and you should be able to see the interesting shapes of bare branches. Notice the many shades of green that are present in your garden. Many trees and shrubs have colorful bark, interesting seed pods to attract the birds, and attractive foliage that gives you something to look at. Winter doesn't necessarily mean the garden has to be dull, drab or lifeless.

This is a wonderful time to plant trees and shrubs. If you hold a clump of dirt in your hand and squeeze without getting dripping water, then you can still dig and plant. Nurseries dig and pot trees and shrubs in the Pacific Northwest after we have had three or four good fall rains and the weather has cooled. By planting now, you get first choice of the new crop. The plants you choose to grace your garden get a good start. Best of all, if we're having our typical winter, you don't have to worry about keeping them watered. As an added bonus, remaining weeds are easily removed.

Here are some ideas to get you started.

Chamaecyparis pisifera 'Filifera Aurea' (Gold Thread False Cypress): a broadly pyramidal shrub to 10 feet tall. Its foliage is bright green and yellow with large flattened fan leaves mixed with elongated threadlike branchlets that arch gracefully.

Cornus alba (Red-Twig Dogwood): a vigorous upright shrub 6 to 10 feet tall. Winter shows off its bare blood red branches and twigs. In the spring it has clusters of creamy yellow flowers followed by deep rich green leaves above, lighter below. The leaves turn red in the fall.

Daphne odora (Winter Daphne): an evergreen open shrub that blooms in late winter. The flowers are pink to deep red on the outside and intensely fragrant. The leaves are thick and glossy. It can reach a height of 8 to 10 feet.

Garrya elliptica (Coast Silktassel): an evergreen shrub, with dense foliage, that grows 10 to 20 feet. Elliptical, wavy-edged leaves to 2 ½ inches long are dark green above with gray and woolly undersides. Clustered flower tassels appear in winter.

Hamamelis mollis (Chinese Witch Hazel): an upright open shrub that can reach 10 to 15 feet. It has fragrant yellow flowers borne on bare branches mid- to late-winter. The mid-green leaves turn to a deep golden yellow in the fall. Also, *H. japonica* (Japanese Witch Hazel), which is very erect, grows 12 to 20 feet, and has wonderful fall foliage in shades of red, purple and yellow.

Helleborus orientalis (Lenten Rose): a perennial plant that grows 1 to 3 feet tall and has basal clumps of substantial, long-stalked green leaves, divided fan-like into leaflets. Also *H. niger* (Christmas Rose). Both produce large late-winter flowers.

Kalmia latifolia (Mountain Laurel): a slow-growing cousin of the rhododendron. It reaches 4 to 6 feet tall with equal spread and has glossy, leathery, oval leaves and clusters of pink buds which open to apple blossom-type flowers in late spring. There are varieties that produce flowers in many interesting colors.

Leycesteria formosa (Himalayan Honeysuckle or Himalayan Pheasantberry): a plant with arching, suckering, cane-like stems growing to 6 feet tall. The flowers are trumpet shaped, carried on arching racemes. The berries that follow are enclosed in purple leafy sheaths and start out green, turn red and finally a purplish black.

Mahonia aquifolium (Oregon Grape): a native of the Pacific Coast. Clusters of blue berries are borne on an evergreen shrub 6 feet tall and 5 feet wide. The leaves are holly shaped and in the cooler months, develop a purplish cast. The 'Compacta' variety grows 2 to 3 feet tall with a spread of 5 feet.

Pyracantha (Firethorn): a shrub with clusters of red, orange, or yellow berries the size of peas that remain during the winter months. The plant is evergreen with glossy green leaves and spines. It can range from 10 to 15 feet in height, dependent on variety. Birds are attracted to its edible berries.

Thuja occidentalis 'Rheingold': a slow growing cone-shaped plant to 6 feet that belongs to the arborvitae family. The flat fanlike leaves remain a golden orange throughout the winter. In spring the leaves have a pink tinge to them.

Prunus X subhirtella 'Autumnalis' (Higan Cherry): a spreading deciduous tree to 15 feet. The early pale bronze leaves turn dark green, then yellow in autumn. If the winter is mild, white or pink flowers are borne on the dark knobbed branches intermittently from late fall through winter and into early spring.

The plants above are only the tip of the iceberg. There are azaleas, bamboos, camellias, dianthus, euonymus, fatsia, galantus, heather, holly... The list goes on and on. Winter gardens can be as glorious as summer. Now that your appetite is whetted, Mary Robson, WSU Area Extension Agent has an interesting article, Gardening: Unusual plants for winter gardens, with more planting recommendations and gardens you can visit.

Resources

Brenzel, Kathleen Noris. *Western Garden Book*. Menlo Park, California: Sunset Publishing Corporation.

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