

Adding Winter Interest to Landscapes



Interest in a winter garden comes from hardscaping and plants.

Snow. Structure is what gives a garden year-round interest, with trees and shrubs providing dimension so that it is not just a single plane. Think about what attracts the eye. Are there plantings or other elements that create lines or show specific form or texture? Does snow cling to evergreen branches? Are there vast empty swaths where herbaceous perennials have been cut back or do seed heads from ornamental grasses and last year's flowers dance in the wind? Are there berries on trees or shrubs just waiting for birds to eat them? Do garden structures, art, or unique plants serve as focal points? Examine the landscape and note where plants or other features could be added for four-season interest. With careful selection of plants that provide visually interesting textures, colors, and movement, it's possible to make winter a season of natural beauty. It might even help you see our coldest months in a new way and enjoy the subtle beauty of the winter garden.

In the Midwest the gardening season only lasts a few months, and the harsh reality is that winter is the longest season for our landscapes. But winter needn't be a boring time in the garden; views of gardens can – and should – still be appreciated from indoors. Most of a garden's interest in winter comes from the architecture or underlying structure, including both hardscaping and plants.

The best time of year to assess a landscape is when it is covered in a blanket of



Evaluate your landscape's structure for its interest in winter.



Evergreen conifers are an obvious choice to add winter interest for their color and form.

Many woody plants provide year-round interest, either for their evergreen foliage or other visually interesting features. Conifers with needle-like leaves are a common element of most landscapes in our northern climes. Most of our cone-bearing trees and shrubs are evergreen (larch is one exception that is deciduous) and come in all sizes, shapes and colors. Arborvitae, pines, and junipers come in a variety of green shades, as well as selected cultivars in blue, yellow or even with a hint of red. Colorado blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) and white fir (*Abies concolor*) have steel blue needles, while the foliage of Japanese false cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Golden Mop', 'Dwarf Gold Thread', and other cultivars) is a bright gold color. But there are also some broadleaf evergreens, such as boxwood (*Buxus* spp.),

hollies, and rhododendrons, which keep their leaves to provide color through the winter. Evergreens tend to be a long-term investment and placing them correctly in the landscape is essential for maximum impact as well as their survival.

Evergreens are an obvious choice to add impact in a landscape covered with snow, but many deciduous trees and shrubs have interesting features that are highlighted by the absence of foliage. Textured or exfoliating bark and highly symmetrical or convoluted branching habits are more visible. Peeling and curling bark, which often reveals a different color below, such as on river birch (*Betula nigra*), three-flowered maple (*Acer triflorum*), and climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala* ssp. *petiolaris*), or the deeply furrowed trunk of oaks, walnut or ash are more noticeable against a white background. Amur chokecherry (*P. maackii*) has smooth, almost metallic copper-colored bark that really shines in winter;



Features of deciduous plants that are more apparent in winter include peeling bark of a river birch (*Betula nigra*) (L), red or yellow stems of dogwoods (*Cornus* spp.) (C), and contorted branches of Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') covered in snow (R).

Japanese tree lilac (*Syringa reticulata*) also has attractive shiny reddish-brown bark. The often intricate branching pattern of trees or shrubs that just appear rounded during the growing summer is revealed when leafless, and some, such as Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') with its twisting, spiraling, corkscrew branches, are even more interesting than when in leaf. If possible, position trees where their dark branches rising up against the sky can look like black ink paintings. Some plant skeletons, such as hydrangeas with their faded, dried flowers, look especially nice when covered with a sparkling frost or dusted with snow. Some woody plants, particularly dogwoods and willows, have brightly colored stems, especially in late winter through early spring. A large group of multi-stemmed deciduous shrubs with colorful stems and twigs makes a dramatic statement in the landscape. Regular pruning in late winter before new growth resumes is important in keeping these plants vibrant as the older stems are not as colorful.

Many woody plants retain their fruits or dried flowers long after leaves have dropped. The deep red, pyramidal fruit clusters of sumac and the large tomato-like hips of *Rosa rugosa* persist through winter, while viburnums, especially the American highbush cranberry (*Viburnum opulus* var. *americana*



Fruits on a viburnum add color in winter.



Red Jewel™ crabapples in snow.

(=*trilobum*)), and many cultivars of crabapples (*Malus* spp., such as 'Donald Wyman', 'Jewelcole' (Red Jewel™), and 'Winter Gold') are noted for the persistent, colorful fruit that is favored by birds. Chokeberries (*Aronia* spp.) and winterberry or deciduous holly (*Ilex verticillata*) also have persistent fruits.

Most herbaceous perennials do die back to the ground each year, with the foliage growing anew each spring. But many of them have stalks or seed pods that can be left standing to add texture and form – as well as food for birds who add another dimension of interest to the garden in winter. Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and others with large seedheads are very striking against a white backdrop of snow. Even though perennial gardens are rarely designed for their appearance in winter, consider waiting until spring to cut back at least some of the plants there for some winter interest. Some common perennials that have interesting dry flowers or seedheads include black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* spp.), yarrow (*Achillea*) 'Coronation Gold', *Sedum spectabile* 'Autumn Joy', ornamental onions (*Allium*), globe thistle (*Echinops ritro*), astilbe and snakeroot (*Actaea = Cimicifuga*). A few perennials, such as European ginger (*Asarum europaeum*) and pigsqueak (*Bergenia cordifolia*) remain evergreen, and their foliage can contribute color (if not buried in snow).

The ornamental grasses are a large group of herbaceous perennials that provide structure and movement in the landscape, with taller types adding a great vertical element, and many providing food and shelter for birds. They are especially dramatic when planted near evergreens. Many remain standing upright through the winter and are best cut back in late winter or early spring before new growth resumes in the spring, rather than fall. There are many choices among both native and introduced species, with a variety of heights, colors and types of inflorescences.

There are many other features in a landscape that can provide interest outside of the growing season. Hardscaping, such as paths, walls, seating areas, or other constructed elements can provide an extra dimension in an otherwise sleeping garden. If not stored inside, weather-proof garden art, pottery, obelisks, trellises and furniture often become more noticeable when they aren't competing with so many plants for attention. And birdhouses and feeders do double duty, adding visual interest as well as being functional.



Leave sturdy ornamental grasses, such as this *Miscanthus*, standing for their structure and movement in the landscape.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Additional Information:

- Waiting for Spring: Winter Interest at the National Arboretum – on the US National Arboretum website at www.usna.usda.gov/Gardens/faqs/WinterInterests.html
- Creating Winter Interest – an article on the Chicago Botanic Garden website at www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/creating_winter_interest