

Winter Gardens

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A surprisingly large number of books have been written on the subject of winter gardens and plants of winter interest. Yet I have seen relatively few gardens in the United States specifically designated as "winter gardens." Although winter gardens may be of only marginal interest in frost-free areas of the country and difficult to achieve where winters are long and severe, over much of the United States climatic conditions are such that many trees and shrubs of winter interest can be grown easily.

A current trend that may eventually make winter gardens more common is an increasing interest among horticulturists in multiseasonal woody plants. Various holly hybrids and species, viburnums, and cultivars of such dogwoods as *Cornus florida* and *C. kousa* are currently riding a crest of popularity, while peegee hydrangeas, deutzias, lilacs, and spireas are not as highly favored as they once were. Similarly, much attention is now being paid to plants that flower at seasons in which few other trees and shrubs are in bloom; for example, the *Stewartia* species and the new hybrid crape myrtles from the National Arboretum. Al-

though these plants have become popular for their late-season floral color, they also have very attractive bark, which enhances the winter landscape.

Below is a list of trees and shrubs especially valuable for their winter interest. With very few exceptions these have considerable merit as landscape plants in other seasons as well. Some, designated by an asterisk (*), have not been found to be reliably hardy at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, where the minimum winter temperature is -10°F to -5°F .

With the vagaries of winter weather, the blooming times of winter-flowering trees and shrubs can vary considerably from year to year. A case in point is wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*). * In the area around Washington, D.C., several plants were in bloom on New Year's Day, 1982, delightfully perfuming the air. Two days later the flowers were dead, killed by extremely cold weather. In 1981 the flower buds were killed as they began to open, although in other years this shrub was in flower between Christmas and New Year's Day. In some years it does not begin to flower until February, and in others flowering occurs sporadically from December to March. Such is the fate of many winter-flowering plants in areas that can experience relatively mild and open winters one year and brutally cold ones the next.

Wintersweet does not have showy flowers

Opposite: Hamamelis virginiana is the first of the witch hazels to blossom. The flowers usually appear in October or November.

P.E. Genereux photo.

but is valued for its fragrance. The flowers measure $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch across and have waxy and translucent outer tepals (undifferentiated sepals and petals) of a yellow-green color. The inner tepals are smaller and purplish brown.

The variety *grandiflorus* has somewhat larger flowers, up to $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter, and deeper yellow tepals but is less strongly scented. Another variety, *luteus*, is similar except that the inner tepals are yellow rather than purplish.

The witch hazels are among the most reliable winter-flowering plants in the mid-Atlantic region. The earliest to flower is *Hamamelis virginiana*, with yellow flowers appearing usually in October and November.

Several cultivars of witch hazel have arisen over the years, both in the United States and Europe. Many have resulted from the chance hybridization between *H. mollis* and *H. japonica*, giving rise to a range of petal colors, including red, orange, gold, and pale yellow. Among the best of these is *H. × intermedia* 'Arnold Promise', developed from a plant grown from seed sown in 1928 at the Arnold Arboretum.

'Arnold Promise' has the qualities of heavy flower production, showiness, exceptional flower color and size, good autumn coloration, and attractive growth habit, which combine to make it a first-class shrub. It has deep, clear yellow flowers $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches across. The inch-long ribbonlike petals unwind like watch springs on bright, warm days in late winter.

While 'Arnold Promise' tends to flower in late February it is typically preceded by *H. mollis*, the Chinese witch hazel. This species has golden yellow flowers with petals that are open and flat, not crinkled like those of 'Arnold Promise'.

One of the best of the red-flowered witch

hazels is *H. × intermedia* 'Diane'. The plant has a neat and attractive habit and its large crimson-red flowers appear in February. Occasionally 'Diane' produces red and yellow flowers on the same stem. Unlike many of the other red-flowered cultivars, 'Diane' stands out well in winter landscapes. The witch-hazel cultivars with other than yellow flowers become "lost" against a background of deciduous or evergreen plants, but not 'Diane'. Its cheery red flowers glisten in the winter sun.

Parrotia persica, a witch-hazel relative often mentioned as a winter-flowering plant, usually does not flower before April. It has rather insignificant flowers.

Stachyurus praecox, a coarse-foliaged shrub that grows to 10 feet or more, is at its best in winter. It flowers usually in February in Washington, D.C., and in March farther north, and produces up to 20 cream-colored or pale yellow flowers together in racemes 2 to 3 inches long. Flowering often occurs in alternate years only. *S. praecox* is a distinctive plant for the winter garden.

The autumn-flowering cherry (*Prunus subhirtella* var. *autumnalis*) is a tree that seems to be ready to bloom any time between October and April in the Washington area and September and November farther north provided nature supplies a few consecutive warm days. It produces semidouble white flowers and grows to a height of 30 feet. The cultivar 'Autumnalis Rosea' is similar but has semidouble pale pink flowers.

In the Washington, D.C., area, *Pieris japonica* and its various cultivars frequently show flower-bud color starting in late February (late March and early April in the North). The diminutive evergreen shrub *Sarcococca humilis** can almost always be relied upon to scent the air at the same sea-

son, although its flowers are hidden below the foliage.

The heaths, *Erica herbacea* (*E. carnea*) and its numerous cultivars, offer exciting possibilities for the winter garden. They seem to grow best in sandy, peaty soil where summers are not too hot. Heaths are available in a number of flower colors and forms. Most are low growing, less than 1 foot in height, and can flower any time between October and April in the Washington area. In the North the flowering time is later (February or March). Their flowers are extremely cold-tolerant.

Many trees and shrubs carry ornamental fruits from autumn well into winter or spring. Fruit color can range from red to orange, yellow, white, purple, or blue. Ornamental fruits can be a rich addition to the garden and provide a longer season of interest than ephemeral flowers.

The rose family provides a number of winter-interest plants with ornamental fruits. Locally, the hawthorn *Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King' is an ideal winter plant, as each year it is heavily laden with shiny, bright red fruits that remain until spring. It is especially attractive when viewed against blue winter skies.

From the Gulf Coast comes *C. brachycantha*, a hawthorn with bright blue fruits covered with a waxy bloom. This plant is especially noteworthy in that intense shades of blue are very rare in fruits of hardy trees. *C. × lavalleyi* has very durable and attractive fruits of a pleasing orange-red color, persisting all winter.

Cotoneasters, as a group, have conspicuous and lasting red fruits. There are many from which to choose, including both deciduous and evergreen forms. Most have fruits that make an effective display in au-



The pear-shaped fruits of *Rosa omeiensis* are bright red and are borne on yellow stalks.

Al Bussewitz photo.

tumn and early winter; however, *C. microphyllus* usually retains its fruits for a long period, from fall to spring.

Many of the species roses have persistent red fruits, but the small red fruits of *Rosa multiflora* and *R. virginiana* are outstanding throughout the fall and winter. The omei rose (*R. omeiensis*) is an attractive winter garden plant on account of its showy, large red prickles, which are translucent in the winter sun, and its red pear-shaped fruits borne on yellow stalks.

The viburnums are well-known shrubs or small trees of multiseason interest. Most ornamental species have red or black fruits, which are at their best in late summer or fall. Viburnums with especially long-lasting fruit displays include the linden viburnum (*V. dilatatum*), which has bright red fruits, and its yellow-fruited form *xanthocarpum*.



Viburnum dilatatum xanthocarpum
Drawing by Emily Osman.

V. dilatatum 'Erie', developed by the National Arboretum, is noteworthy for the quantity, quality, and longevity of its fruit display. *Viburnum opulus*, with red fruits, and its form *xanthocarpum*, with golden yellow fruits, remains handsome from late summer until March.

Perhaps no plants are more readily associated with winter than the hollies. Many, such as the American and English hollies, have evergreen foliage and red fruits throughout the fall and winter. Both the American and English species have given rise to yellow-fruited forms as well. Among the deciduous hollies, one newcomer, *Ilex* 'Sparkleberry' from the National Arboretum, merits considerable attention as a plant for the winter garden. Each year it produces a heavy crop of very bright red fruits, which seem almost to glow. So bright are the fruits that they stand out in the winter landscape from a distance of 50 yards or more.

Other plants producing attractive fruits include the sea buckthorn (*Hippophae*

rhamnoides) with orange fruits studding the branches much of the winter. Birds feed on the fruits of many trees and shrubs, lessening their effectiveness, but the fruits of sea buckthorn are very acidic and tend to be a food choice of last resort.

White fruits are produced by a few shrubs such as *Nandina domestica* f. *alba*,* the snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*), and *Skimmia japonica* f. *leucocarpa*.* These are most effective in autumn and early winter.

While the quality of winter flowers and fruits can vary considerably from year to year, plants selected for the color or form of their bark and stems are more reliable.

One of our native hawthorns, *Crataegus spathulata*, the little-hip hawthorn, has small, bright red fruits and bark that exfoliates in irregular patches like that of *Parrotia persica*, revealing areas on the trunk and branches colored cinnamon-red, silver-

Hippophae rhamnoides
Drawing by Emily Osman.



gray, tan, and green. The overall effect is that of a small open-crowned tree with reddish bark. Native from Virginia to Texas, *C. spathulata* is probably hardy in gardens where minimum winter temperatures do not drop below -5°F . *C. marshallii*, the parsley hawthorn, also native to the southern United States, has bark that is very similar to that of *C. spathulata* and would make an equally attractive tree for the winter garden.

Birches need no introduction as plants of special and enduring winter interest. Most species are native to the more northerly latitudes, where they are important components of both the natural landscape and gardens. In recent years considerable attention has been focused on several of the Asiatic *Betula* species. There is evidence that Asian birch species such as *Betula albo-sinensis* and *B. platyphylla* and their varieties may offer resistance to bronze birch borer, a serious and destructive pest of ornamental American and European birches, especially *B. papyrifera* and *B. pendula*. This insect is particularly troublesome in the Middle Atlantic States, where it is one of the principal factors limiting the successful culture of several white-barked birches.

For winter gardens in areas where bronze birch borers are a problem, the use of resistant species might be a solution. *B. platyphylla*, from China and Korea, the Japanese white birch, *B. platyphylla* var. *japonica*, and *B. platyphylla* var. *szechuanica*, from Western China, offer considerable promise and are becoming increasingly available in American nurseries.

B. platyphylla and its varieties occur naturally over a wide area in Asia, and bark coloration varies. However, for the most part these trees have attractive white or chalk-

white bark of considerable ornamental merit. In the wild *B. platyphylla* may attain a height of 75 to 85 feet.

The Hillier Arboretum, in Hampshire, England, grows a clone of *B. jacquemontii** with spectacular pure, shining white bark of unmatched beauty. Apparently this clone has not been given a cultivar name, nor has it been widely introduced into the United States. *B. jacquemontii* is occasionally available from American nurseries, but the bark color is apt to depart from the dazzling white of the Hillier Arboretum clone to shades of ochre, brown, and pink and various combinations of these colors. *B. jacquemontii* is native to the Western Himalayas and is closely related to *B. utilis*.

Another Asian birch for the winter garden, *B. albo-sinensis*, is highly prized in England, and its merits are slowly becoming recognized here. It was introduced by E. H. Wilson in 1901 from Western China, and he described the bark as "bright orange to orange-red, peeling off in very thin sheets, each successive sheet covered with white glaucous bloom." Several years later British horticulturist C. Coltman-Rogers praised *B. albo-sinensis*, saying, "Its orange peeling papery bark, shining like burnished copper, leaves behind it a creamy, glaucous bloom that puts one in mind of a similar effect obtained from that rare maple *Acer griseum*."

The variety *B. albo-sinensis* var. *septentrionalis*, also a Wilson introduction, has bark suffused with orange, yellow, and gray. The species and its variety are reputed to be resistant to bronze birch borer.

The paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) rates as one of the premier small ornamental trees for any season but is especially attractive in winter. The outer bark curls and peels away in strips much like the canoe or paper birch



The British horticulturist C. Coltmar-Rogers described the peeling bark of this birch (*Betula albosinensis*) as leaving behind "a creamy, glaucous bloom."

to reveal the cinnamon or fawn-colored bark beneath. The bark peels off not only on the trunk but on many of the smaller branches as well. *A. griseum* grows to about 45 feet and has trifoliate leaves. It is another E. H. Wilson introduction from Central China.

The "snakebark" maples strike quite a different note in the winter garden and are

characterized by having smooth green bark with longitudinal streaks of white. Several species of maples give the "snakebark" effect. Among the most attractive are *A. davidii*,* *A. grossii* var. *hersii*, *A. laxiflorum*,* and *A. pensylvanicum*. All are small- to medium-sized trees, 30 to 50 feet in height.

A. pensylvanicum 'Erythrocladum' is a particularly valuable tree for winter interest. Besides having jade-green bark with white stripes, the wood produced the previous spring turns a brilliant scarlet-pink beginning about the time of the first frost.

One of the more famous trees for bark coloration is the coral-bark maple (*A. palmatum* 'Senkaki' or 'Sangokaku'). The young branches are coral-red throughout the winter. The best coloration is achieved where plants are situated in full sun and is especially attractive when there is snow on the ground. An excellent companion planting is *A. palmatum* 'Aoyagi', a Japanese maple with bright green branches of a color not matched by any other plant. Used together, the two cultivars can create a stunning effect in the garden.

Some of the shrubby dogwoods are among the most attractive plants displaying variously colored stems in winter, but they are not for the faint of heart. Cultivars of both *Cornus alba* and *C. sericea* must be pruned hard (almost to the ground) early each spring to encourage strong, straight, and vigorous shoots. Otherwise they will grow large and cease to produce colorful stems.

The paper-bark maple (*Acer griseum*) is especially attractive in winter.

Richard E. Weaver, Jr photo.



C. alba var. *sibirica* has bright crimson-red stems to about four feet. It is frequently used in combination with *C. sericea* var. *flaviramea*, which has bright yellow to ochre-green stems. Black-purple to purple-brown winter stem coloration can be seen in *C. alba* var. *kesselringii*.

The white willow (*Salix alba*) has yielded a number of cultivars with red or yellow stem coloration. As with the *C. alba* and *C. sericea* cultivars mentioned previously, the most intense stem colors develop as a result of annual pruning. *S. alba* f. *chermesina* has bright red winter stems while *S. alba* var. *vitellina* has yellow or orange-yellow twigs.

A native American willow, *S. irrorata*, though rarely seen in gardens, is a very desirable plant for the winter garden, since it has purple stems overlaid with a chalk-white bloom. This shrub will grow to a height of 10 to 15 feet but is best pruned hard annually to encourage stem growth.

A similar stem coloration, chalk-white over purple, can be found in some of the brambles. Several brambles have these stem colors, including *Rubus biflorus** and *R. tibetanus*,* but *R. cockburnianus* is perhaps the finest of the lot with its arching stems and fernlike foliage.

Two cherries, *Prunus maackii* and *P. serrula*, are conspicuous plants for winter gardens. Indeed, they have little to offer except bark characteristics. The paperbark cherry (*P. serrula*) has polished mahogany-red bark, which exfoliates in strips. It is especially attractive when sited so that sunlight shines on the plant from behind the peeling and curling bark strips. The floral display is weak and the foliage is of no particular merit. The Manchurian cherry (*P. maackii*) has yellow to gold-brown polished bark, peeling in ir-



A *Rubus* species. These species are valued for their stem coloration, purple overlaid with a white bloom.

regular strips. The color of the bark is unique and perhaps the most beautiful among hardy trees.

Among pines grown for ornamental bark qualities the lacebark pine, *Pinus bungeana*, ranks very high. This tree typically has smooth bark, which exfoliates to reveal an irregular mosaic in green, white, purple, yellow, and brown. Native to China, this pine is often multistemmed.

In Korea there are several lacebark pines said to be 600 or more years old. These trees are remarkable in that they have very white

bark, a characteristic not seen in Western gardens, and they tend to produce a single trunk.

There are several other trees with bark that attracts attention during the winter months. The beeches, both European and American, with their smooth gray bark, and the American hornbeam, or "blue beech" (*Carpinus caroliniana*), which has gray bark with musclelike undulations, can add much to the winter garden setting. Similarly, the flaking or dappled bark of *Cornus kousa*, *Parrotia persica*, *Cydonia sinensis*,* and the plane trees, or sycamores (*Platanus* species), make their contributions to the garden in every season.

Plants having contorted or twisted branches are particularly noticeable in winter. Among the shrubs displaying this characteristic is the corkscrew filbert or "Harry Lauder's walking stick" (*Corylus avellana* var. *contorta*). This shrub, growing to a height of 12 feet or more, has oddly twisted and curled stems and branches, and the male catkins are present throughout the winter. In February the pendulous two-inch long catkins become yellow as they begin to shed pollen. During the growing season this plant is densely covered in coarse green foliage; thus winter is its best season.

At least one California nursery is offering a contorted cultivar of hardy orange (*Poncirus trifoliata* 'Flying Dragon'). Its branches grow in a sinuous zigzag fashion and are a rich olive green in winter, while its bright orange, golf-ball-sized fruits are handsome in autumn and early winter.

The corkscrew willow (*Salix matsudana* 'Tortuosa') has an ascending growth habit with prominent twisted and contoured branches, especially as a young plant. It can



The contorted branches of the corkscrew filbert, or Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* var. *contorta*), are most noticeable in winter.

be impressive in a winter garden when viewed against the skyline, but as most willows, it tends to be short lived, possesses a formidable root system, and is subject to various insects and diseases.

A case can be made for almost any evergreen plant as a candidate for winter interest. Numerous dwarf and full-sized conifers and their allies are especially attractive in winter. The various bluish color forms of *Picea pungens*, the gray and blue of *Juniperus* cultivars, the yellow-foliaged forms of *Chamaecyparis*, and the red bronze

of *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans' are only a few of many that can be selected for winter form, texture, habit, and color. Yews and camellias can be useful; however, moderation is called for as masses of plants with dark green foliage can be oppressive.

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