

HOME-GARDEN

Gardening Central Mass.: Appreciating the Winter Garden

Mark Richardson Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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I love winter. Sure, snow is a pain to clean up, sunsets at 4 p.m. are obnoxious, and snowshoeing sounds better in theory than in practice, but there is something captivating about the quiet simplicity of a New England winter landscape. Once the leaves fall, sunlight seems brighter, and shadows are longer and more pronounced, revealing the subtle beauty of winter bark and evergreen foliage.

Some people say you should design your garden “backward,” thinking first about winter, then fall, summer and spring. While it may feel counterintuitive, designing first for the least colorful season helps create a strong foundation with something to offer year-round. This guidance also makes sense when we think of winter in New England as encompassing all those long months from November to April when there are no leaves on deciduous trees. Of course we should design our gardens with winter in mind first — we have to live with the winter landscape for half the year.

Creating a beautiful winter garden all comes down to choosing the right plants—trees, shrubs, and perennials that offer what gardeners call “winter interest.” This can be tricky. Some of my favorite garden plants either look terrible or completely disappear in winter. Umbrella-leaf magnolia (*Magnolia tripetala*) is a great example — huge flowers in mid-summer, giant leaves that look almost tropical, gorgeous fruit in fall, but horrendous winter form. Umbrella-leaf magnolia in winter looks like a 3-year-old’s drawing of a tree come to life. It’s irregular and weird and just looks terrible. Many of this plant’s cousins, however, are great additions to the winter garden. Star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*), for example, has flower buds resembling pussy willows that hang around all winter. And when this small tree loses its leaves, beautiful smooth grey bark becomes even more visible. Many other deciduous trees still look good after their leaves have fallen. They may have colorful stems, or a distinctive growth pattern that offers something attractive even during winter.

Some evergreen element is critical in the winter garden. But not all evergreens are created equal. Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) is an excellent shrub and is native throughout New England. To say it stays evergreen is a bit of a stretch, however. Many mountain laurels lose all but a few leaves toward the tips of their stems each fall. If you're looking for a dense evergreen screen, mountain laurel is not the shrub for you. Another native shrub alternative, great rosebay (*Rhododendron maximum*) is a better option. Growing quickly to a height of 12 feet or more, great rosebay is reliably hardy, features beautiful spring flowers, and forms a dense thicket of evergreen foliage, making it a wonderful choice for the winter garden.

Winter is also the time to appreciate the beauty of bark. So many woody ornamental plants feature striking bark, with unique colors and textures to appreciate all winter. Red oak (*Quercus rubra*) owes its name partially to the way the fissures in its bark turn red when wet. I once heard someone describe the smooth gray bark of an American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) as looking like an elephant's leg. Japanese stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamellia*) also has some outstanding bark in winter, with large pieces of reddish-brown to bronze bark that peel off, exposing olive or white bark beneath. Japanese stewartia is an ideal plant for a four-season garden, with ample winter interest, beautiful summer flowers, and outstanding fall color to boot.

Now that winter is upon us, make note of the plants around you that have cold-season appeal. Some might surprise you. Subtle characteristics, like the hardened fronds of ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) poking up through a fresh carpet of snow, add a quiet detail to a garden. The leaves of many evergreen shrubs like bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) or PJM rhododendron (*Rhododendron* 'PJM') turn subtle shades of purple or red in fall and hold the color through winter. Many of us long for warmer temperatures when it's cold and blustery outside. Creating gardens that shine during the coldest months may help remind you that spring is around the corner. Even more, the right combination of beautiful winter plants can help you enjoy the longest season, rather than wishing it away.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by the team at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. Located on 171 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden is one of the region's top horticultural resources. All year long, garden visitors experience the wonder of plants, learn about the natural world, and make joyful connections. There is so much growing at the garden. Discover it today at www.nebg.org. The column will be published on the third Sunday of the month.

