

HOME-GARDEN

Gardening Central Mass.: The clear view into the winter garden

Steven Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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On chilly days, in the heart of winter, I am tempted to retreat to a warm spot on my couch and wall myself off from the frozen reality outside with a cup of hot cocoa and a stack of colorful seed catalogs. Sure, glossy images of perfectly posed flowers and vegetables are certainly a part of planning for the growing season, but the outdoor winter landscape also affords a unique view that can inform your gardening in the coming year.

Our gardens always change in unexpected ways and good gardening requires editing — taking stock of how plants have grown or spread in the landscape, what plants are performing poorly, and where there are spaces that could use the addition of a new plant (we gardeners are always looking for an excuse to acquire a new plant!). I love being in the garden at the height of summer when plantings are finally maturing, and the space feels lively and full, but the cacophony of colorful blooms and bountiful foliage can mask the fundamental elements of the garden as a whole. The energetic scene of a summer garden is literally buzzing with activity, and it can be hard to see past the dense foliage and dazzling color. The stillness of winter makes editing the garden easier. In the winter garden, crowded shrubs are obvious, the scale of plants can be compared, and the garden space's relationship to the greater landscape comes into focus.

A garden in the winter presents a clear perspective of the landscape's architectural features. It gives me an opportunity to see the lines of garden beds and placement of trees in clear relationship to each other. I like to leave perennials standing as autumn draws to a close for the benefit of wildlife and visual interest, but this practice also gives me a better view of spacing within garden beds as well. Seeing clumps of tawny grasses and old seed heads helps me note where I might divide or add plants in the coming spring.

Conifers and other evergreens are stars of the winter garden. I love how they provide a desperately needed shot of chlorophyll for the winter landscape, but their textures are also on

full display, so that I can think about pairing them with plants that have complimentary or contrasting character. For example, to accentuate the soft, feathery needles of a dwarf white pine, I plan for broad tropical foliage nearby; or the leathery leaves of rhododendrons are an inspiring backdrop for tufted aster flowers.

When the garden is active and green, the character and form of deciduous trees are less obvious, but in winter these trees reveal their structures. The sun sits low in the sky, silhouetting trunks and branches. It is an ideal time to see where growth can be trained with corrective pruning and what features of the tree's form can be emphasized with accompanying perennials and annuals.

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I inspect the bare branches of deciduous shrubs and trees for damage and disease in the winter. These problems can be pruned out before the growing season. In fact, it's an ideal time to clean up fruit trees, pruning extraneous new sprouts that will not bear fruit and any sign of pathogens or pests. Although the cold means pests are dormant, it is still best practice to clean and sanitize pruning tools as you go to prevent spreading problems from tree to tree.

Work in the winter garden may slow down but the stillness itself proves a valuable tool for the gardener. After I put fresh eyes on my starkly contrasted winter garden, I have a better idea of how to improve the space and bring more beauty to all four seasons. And after dedicating a chilly day to observing the garden, that cup of cocoa is even more satisfying!

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.