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Native plants for winter interest

by Cheryl Lowe

Finding beauty in the winter garden is as much about perception as substance. The absolute purity of fresh snow transforms the landscape. Like icing on a cake, it highlights the graceful form of a tree—the thick, drooping branches of a Catalpa tree, or the broad, dark majesty of an oak. Snow preserves the animal encounters we missed—the squirrel's leaping stride from tree to excavated cache and back, or the whisper of an owl's wings as it snatches a hare. Sound, too, becomes

so crisp and clear in the winter, whether it is squeaky snow underfoot on the coldest days or the crack of of a breaking icicle. For me, the ultimate pleasure, however, is the silence, the absolute stillness after a fresh snow.

But when I think of the special allure of winter's light, that now becomes the ultimate joy. The soft, pearl-like quality of winter light alters the landscape, from the surreal shafts of light slicing through the tree canopy's bare branches, to the long shadows dancing on a wall.

But this is an article about plants. And, as with other aspects of winter, the appeal of plants draws on aesthetic subtleties—softer colors, contrasting shapes, vertical accents, textures of bark, and graceful forms. In snowy winters, like this one here in New England, shrubs and trees are the dancers on the stage. In a snowless winter, the textures and colors of evergreen groundcovers add soft music to the performance. Following on page 3 are a few suggestions to bring some visual magic to your winter scene.

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Aside from making snow angels and snowmen, how else can you enhance your winter landscape experience?

- * **Leave seed heads on flowers.** Both large and small plantings charm the eye when each vegetative citizen sports a frosty conical cap.
- * **Maintain a rock feature or brush pile.** In addition to being habitats for almost every manner of small critter, these forms also produce unique shapes when dressed in white.
- * **Hang high-quality windchimes.** In order to preserve the silence for nature's sounds, bind the chimes together with a rope most of the time. When you're ready for a transcendental moment, set them free. Your appreciation will be renewed when you hear the tones only on occasion.
- * **Study the shadow** of an immutable object, such as that from a roof peak or fence pole, and mark where that shadow falls on the winter and summer solstices and spring/autumn equinoxes.
- * **Sketch and take photos.** Why stop when the green goes away?—Joy Buslaff

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ELA's Winter Conference, Feb. 28-March 1. Details on page 11.

The lingering pleasures of late fall color...

- Fothergilla gardenii* (Fothergilla) — multi-colored leaves hold well into the fall
- Helonias bullata* (Swamp Pink) — perennial with burgundy-green mounds of leaves
- Hamamelis virginiana* (Witchhazel) — shrub with bright yellow flowers in November
- Zenobia pulverulenta* (Dusty Zenobia) — mounding shrub with very late, soft, rose-red fall color

wildlife

Fruits, seed heads, and foliage; food for wildlife, visual delight for us

- Aronia arbutifolia* (Red Chokeberry) — shrub with long-lasting, dark red berries
- Clethra alnifolia* (Sweet Pepperbush) — shrub with peppercorn seed heads
- Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry) and cultivars — shrub with bright red berries
- Viburnum alnifolium* (Hobblebush) — shrub with golden “eared” buds
- Panicum virgatum* cv. Heavy Metal (Switchgrass) — grass with airy seed heads and vertical foliage
- Schizachyrium scoparium* (Little Bluestem) — grass with slender, bronze foliage
- Sporobolus heterolepis* (Northern Dropseed, Prairie Dropseed) — golden grass forming tight clumps

sculpture

Twigs, buds, and bark

- Amelanchier* spp. (Shadbush or Serviceberry) — small tree with gray, striped bark
- Acer pensylvanicum* (Striped Maple) — tree with green, striped bark
- Betula nigra* (River Birch) cv. Heritage — tree with exfoliating white/pink/salmon bark
- Clethra acuminata* (Mountain Clethra) — shrub with cinnamon bark and peppercorn seed heads
- Cornus sericea* (= *C. stolonifera*) (Red-osier Dogwood) — shrub with bright red twigs
- Halesia carolina* (= *H. tetraptera*) (Carolina Silverbell) — tree with gray, striped bark and lingering tetragonal seedpods
- Hydrangea quercifolia* (Oak-leaf Hydrangea) — shrub with late burgundy fall foliage, exfoliating bark, and large flower clusters that hold up through the winter
- Vaccinium corymbosum* (High Bush Blueberry) — shrub with bright red twigs in early March
- Fagus grandifolia* (American Beech) — younger trees have lingering, golden foliage; smooth, gray bark on all ages

Definition: “=” stands for “also known as.” The first name given is the current preferred nomenclature.

evergreens

Evergreen shrubs and trees—when only green will do

- Pieris floribunda* (Mountain Pieris) — broad, mounding shrub; happy in shade
- Abies concolor* (White Fir) — highly adaptable tree with beautiful blue needles
- Abies grandis* (Grand Fir) — tree with long, horizontal needles
- Calocedrus* (*Libocedrus*) *decurrens* (Incense Cedar) — narrow tree with fragrant foliage
- Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* (Alaska Cedar) — tree with graceful, weeping habit
- Leucothoe fontanesiana* (Drooping Leucothoe) and cv. Girard’s Rainbow — mounding, spreading shrub; the latter cultivar with beautiful calico colors
- Thuja plicata* (Western Red Cedar) — tree with graceful sprays; good substitute for hemlock
- Yucca harrimaniae* (Spanish Bayonet) — evergreen perennial with strong vertical form

Definition: “co” stands for “cultivated variety,” which may not share certain benefits of straight species.

Evergreen groundcovers for those snowless winters

- Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* (Bearberry) — glossy, dark green leaves
- Coptis laciniata* (Oregon Goldthread) — glossy, lacy, dark green leaves
- Carex plataginea* (Plantain Sedge) — long, relatively wide leaves
- Galax urceolata* (Galax) — round leaves with beautiful burgundy winter accents
- Hexastylis minor* (Wild Ginger) — small, heart-shaped, mottled leaves
- Paxistima* (*Pachystima*) *canbyi* (*Pachystima*) — burgundy winter highlights
- Tiarella cordifolia* (Foamflower) — soft, maple-shaped leaves with reddish tints

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