

# The Winter Garden

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## Ask a Master Gardener

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## The Winter Garden: A Study in the Beauty and Resilience of Nature

*Winter is an opportunity to plan and add four-season interest to the garden*

By Ginny Bode, Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener

As winter settles over the Pacific Northwest, the vibrant hues of autumn give way to a quieter, more reflective landscape. While some see the garden in winter as a barren space, this season offers a simpler beauty, one where structure and form take center stage. In this season of rest from the work of gardening, the structural silhouettes of deciduous trees and shrubs reveal the garden's architecture, offering a fresh perspective on plant arrangement. By emphasizing the bones of the landscape, winter highlights the artistic potential of bare branches, textured bark, and the subtle interplay of light and shadow while showcasing the resilience of nature. This winter, look at your garden's potential and where you can contribute to the winter beauty by adding a tree, shrub, or grasses.

When we think of design structure, we often first consider architectural or sculptural elements, such as a gazebo, fountain, trellis, or archway. However, evergreens and the bark and branches of deciduous trees and bushes also provide visual structure. These stand resilient, offering rich hues contrasting against the faded tones of fall decay.

In her book *Designing and Creating a Winter Garden*, Sally Gregson calls evergreens "a green beacon signifying that life continues despite the washed-out decline." Evergreens provide a living structure to the garden with lush foliage while offering shelter for wildlife. We may think of evergreens as towering trees, but evergreen is a broad term that includes small to medium-leaved and needled shrubs in hues of true green, blue-green, and yellow-green.



**Left:** This red *Acer* maple provides a striking winter contrast to the surrounding evergreens. **Right:** The twigs of the 'Midwinter Fire' Bloodtwig dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) put on a vibrant show of color in the winter. Its yellow-golden fall foliage gives way to stems that transition from yellow at the base to fiery orange and crimson at the tips. Photos © Skagit Valley Master Gardeners.

Though bare in winter, deciduous trees and bushes reveal their graceful shapes, adding vertical lines and depth. Together, evergreens and deciduous trees and bushes create a dynamic framework, enhancing the garden's visual interest and serving as a backdrop for seasonal changes.

Study your garden and those you drive by for structure and winter interest. At this time of year it is easy to see the subtle colors and textures and how the shapes work together. Note which vistas seem balanced and why and which seem blank and could use attention. Take pictures to remember plants and vistas you like. Maybe the solution is a statue, panel, or an evergreen. It may take some trial and error, but with some planning now, you'll be ready to plant this coming spring or fall. Your reward will be an interesting and beautiful garden, even during the shortest days of winter.

Beyond the overall structure of the garden, if you love nature's details, the winter garden will not disappoint. Enjoy the bare branches as they form elegant silhouettes. Take a close-up look at the intriguing patterns that emerge on the bark of many trees after the first frost. Acers (or maples,) birches, crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*),



This paper-bark maple (*Acer griseum*) in the Discovery Garden features striking, cinnamon-colored bark peels in thin, papery layers, creating a textured, sculptural effect that adds year-round visual interest to any landscape. Photo © Skagit Valley Master Gardeners.

and ornamental cherries are known for their rich colors and unique textures in winter.



Grasses add visual interest and movement, offering a gentle symphony, reminding us of nature's resilience. Photo © Skagit Valley Master Gardeners.

### ***Grasses Add Magic to the Winter Garden***

Another way to add winter interest is with ornamental grasses, such as placing shorter, smaller grasses outside a window or near an entry to be enjoyed daily. Their slender textural forms sway gracefully in the crisp air as their frost-kissed blades shimmer with delicate crystals.

Many gardens feature taller ornamental grasses like *Miscanthus* and *Panicum*, which show off their feathery plumes as the wind rustles through their stems. These hardy plants contribute to the garden's aesthetic and provide shelter for birds and other wildlife. In the winter garden, grasses embody elegance and strength, showcasing nature's artistry every season.

### ***Berries and Hips***

Many ornamental shrubs and bushes produce colorful berries or hips at the end of the blooming season. As fall gives way to winter, these berries and hips become more vibrant against the limited tones of the dormant winter garden. The bright red, orange, or purple berries of these hardy plants, which include holly, winterberry, beautyberry, and roses, contrast beautifully against evergreen foliage and snowy landscapes. Beyond aesthetics, berries and hips also provide valuable wildlife habitat,

attracting birds and pollinators. These plants thrive in our region's mild, wet winters, offering a long-lasting seasonal display and contributing to a garden's biodiversity.



**Left:** *Nandina*, often called Heavenly Bamboo has vibrant green leaves that turn a deep red or purple in the fall and winter with clusters of red berries, adding a burst of seasonal color. **Right:** For those that like the look of holly without the invasive aspect, *Mahonia* commonly known as Oregon grape, is evergreen and produces lovely yellow flowers followed by berries. It is deer resistant. Photos ©: Ginny Bode | Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Choose a berry-producing bush for the winter ornamental garden with care. Many hollies have become invasive in our area, popping up where birds dropped the berry seeds. David Zuckerman, UW Botanic Gardens Manager of Horticulture, says, "Just don't plant English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), the species with the dark, glossy leaves and bright red berries that most people picture when they hear the word 'holly.' This non-native species has become invasive here and isn't recommended for home gardens, ... leave it to the professional growers." More than 400 varieties of large and small hollies grow well in western Washington; many can be seen at the Washington Arboretum in Seattle, home to the second-largest holly collection in the US. Remember, hollies are dioecious, meaning female plants require a male plant in proximity to produce berries.



**Left:** *Rosa rugosa* provide beauty in the winter as well as the summer garden. They offer a range of benefits that contribute to a garden's ecosystem by providing food for pollinators and animals. **Right:** *Callicarpia* berries provide winter food for mammals and birds, and the spring flowers produce nectar for the bees—a multi-season winner in the garden landscape. Photos ©: Ginny Bode | Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Another berry-producing bush is *Nandina*, commonly known as Heavenly Bamboo. Often used in public plantings, this versatile shrub has striking foliage and berries in winter and offers a beautiful backdrop as the seasons rotate. Its vibrant green leaves turn a deep red or purple in the fall and winter with clusters of red berries, adding a burst of seasonal color. In the spring, *Nandina* produces small white flowers, followed by bright red berries in late summer through winter. Drought-tolerant and low-maintenance, *Nandina* thrives in various soil types, making it ideal for borders, hedges, and decorative accents.

Many berry-producing shrubs and bushes reach a beauty crescendo in the winter. The deciduous Purple Beautyberry (*Callicarpa dichotoma*) puts on a stunning show of iridescent purple berries beginning in fall and hanging on well into winter. This deer-resistant shrub has large and small varieties and is an excellent choice for the garden's ecosystem. *Callicarpa* berries provide winter food for mammals and birds, and the spring flowers produce nectar for the bees—a multi-season winner in the garden landscape.

Rose hips also provide striking color in late fall and winter. All roses produce hips, some that are particularly large and striking. These vibrant, berry-like fruits develop at the end of the blooming season, by not deadheading the blooms and allowing the hips (or seeds) to develop. Rose hips are both beautiful and beneficial to the garden. Their unique shape and bright hues also attract birds and wildlife, adding ecological value. By choosing a rose specifically for the rose hips it produces in fall and winter, you are adding an extra season of beauty to the garden.



Witch Hazel, genus *Hamamelis* puts on a glorious show in early February. Photo © Bobbi Lemme | Skagit County Master Gardener.

#### ***Planting for the Earliest Signs of Spring***

Some of us can't resist the joy of plants which signal winter is waning. Witch hazel (*Hamamelis*) is the first to show spring is coming, with its bright, spidery yellow or orange flowers blooming when it still seems most definitely winter. The fragrant blossoms offer a cheerful burst of color against still-bare branches, telling us warmer days are coming.

Camellias and winter-blooming rhododendrons are also prized for their vibrant flowers while the days are still grey and cold. Camellias, often in shades of pink, red, or white, thrive in mild climates and add color to winter landscapes. Winter-blooming rhododendrons such as “Christmas Cheer”, with its striking clusters of blooms, bring color to gardens even in snow.

As you can see, the possibilities for adding winter interest in the garden are numerous, with many offering the bonus of providing food and shelter to birds and mammals in the winter. Use the grey days ahead to make a plan for adding structure and beauty to your winter garden next year.

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Beyond the trees, shrubs, and grasses mentioned here, previous master gardeners have written about other winter garden favorites. Use these links to read more about:

[Hellebores: A Treat for Your Winter Garden >](#)

[Heaths and Heathers >](#)

Early Blooming Bulbs: [Plant Now for Early Spring Color >](#)

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