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Create color in the winter garden

By Beth Gollan | The Planter's Palette

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For winter color in the garden, think in terms of fruit, foliage, bark and accessories.

Fruit

The winter fruit familiar to gardeners and non-gardeners alike is holly, the traditional staple of holiday decorations. Evergreen varieties such as Blue Prince and Blue Princess offer deep green foliage as a backdrop to their fruit. Deciduous varieties such as Winter Red, when planted with a companion Southern Gentleman, are leafless in winter, but pack a lot of power with a profusion of bright red fruit.

Crabapples are a familiar staple of Midwestern landscaping, and by choosing varieties with persistent small fruit, gardeners get the double duty of beautiful spring flowers and winter interest without the mess of fallen fruit. Look for Firebird, a small-scale specimen tree with tiny ruby-red crabapples held late into the winter or Lancelot, a white-flowered dwarf variety with -inch golden fruit. Prairiefire bears purplish red flowers in spring and maroon fruit that persists through most of the winter.

Black or red chokeberries are adaptable choices for most landscapes. The lustrous red-fruited Brilliantissima holds its fruit well into the winter, as the birds don't seem to like them and will eat other things first.

Rugosa roses can't be beat for the beautiful rosehips that develop on unpruned plants. Other showy-hipped species are the red leaf rose (R. rubrifolia) and meadow rose (R. blanda). The hips are reminiscent of apples, globe-shaped or slightly flattened and one inch or more in diameter. Colors range in shades of red, purple and orange.

For white fruit, choose Snowberry (symphoricarpos) or a white-fruited callicarpa such as Leucocarpa. Another variety of callicarpa, Amethyst bears beautiful lilac-violet berries.

Foliage

The list is surprisingly long, even if the usual suspects such as yews and junipers are excluded. Perennials to consider include bergenia, whose leathery semi-evergreen leaves take on hues of burgundy in winter; the family of heuchera with its generous palette of plum, burgundy, near-black, gold and coral; germander, which is semi-evergreen and reminiscent of a mini-boxwood; hens and chickens and hellebores.

Perennial grasses, such as panicum develop blended shades of amber, gold and tan. An upright to mounded growth habit catches and holds the snow, creating new shadow

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patterns in the garden. Other grasses have upright, vase-shaped forms, and all combine nicely with other perennials, trees and shrubs.

Discover new winter favorites by allowing the foliage of all garden plants to remain through the winter and leaving cleanup to the earliest days of spring.

Bark

Plant a tree with ornamental bark next to a walkway or near a window, where the colors and textures can be easily admired. Cherries and other prunus species are widely known for their beautiful shiny bark. Nice birches include the white-barked whitespire and cinnamon-trunked river or heritage birches.

Two excellent small maples with beautiful bark are the paperbark maple, known for its reddish-brown peeling bark and the three-flower maple, an excellent small tree similar to paperbark maple, with better hardiness and bark that exfoliates in sheets of tan and gray.

Shrub species of dogwood are an absolute staple of winter landscapes. Flaviramea has yellow stems highlighted with an intense green. Cornus sanguinea Winter Fire and Midwinter Flame light up dreary winter days with bright coral, red and yellow gradations in a single stem. Cardinal and Bloodgood are bright red.

The year-round, medium green stems of Japanese kerria make an excellent accent for these dogwoods.

Flowers

Flowers are hard to come by in the Midwest winter landscape, but fall-planted violas, such as pansies and Johnny jump-ups, will sometimes manage to survive long enough to peek out from under a melting snowdrift in December or January. Winter aconite, with its cheerful yellow blossoms, and white snowdrops are reliable and highly recommended late winter bulbs, often emerging through the snow in March.

Accessories

Weatherproof sculpture, birdbaths, pottery and artwork are now readily available. Think "accent color" when choosing freeze-tolerant containers. Paint old metal containers a bright color, fill them with sand and arrange evergreens or twigs with berries in them. Use brightly colored jute ribbon instead of wire when tying protective covers around tender plants. Hanging baskets left over from summer can be refilled with sprigs of evergreens, berries, grasses and colorful dried flower heads. Lampposts, garden gates and trellises can be festooned with more of the same.

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