

Virginia Gardener

# VIRGINIA GARDENER

VIRGINIA TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING

## Cool-Season Alternatives

PLANTS FOR FALL, WINTER & EARLY-SPRING COLOR

CREATING  
OLD WORLD  
CHARM  
IN YOUR  
LANDSCAPE

MINIATURE  
GARDENING  
WITH INDOOR  
TERRARIUMS

*Also inside!*  
THE WINTER KITCHEN  
GARDEN - KEEP IT GROWING!

FOREIGN INSECT PESTS AND  
HOW TO GET RID OF THEM

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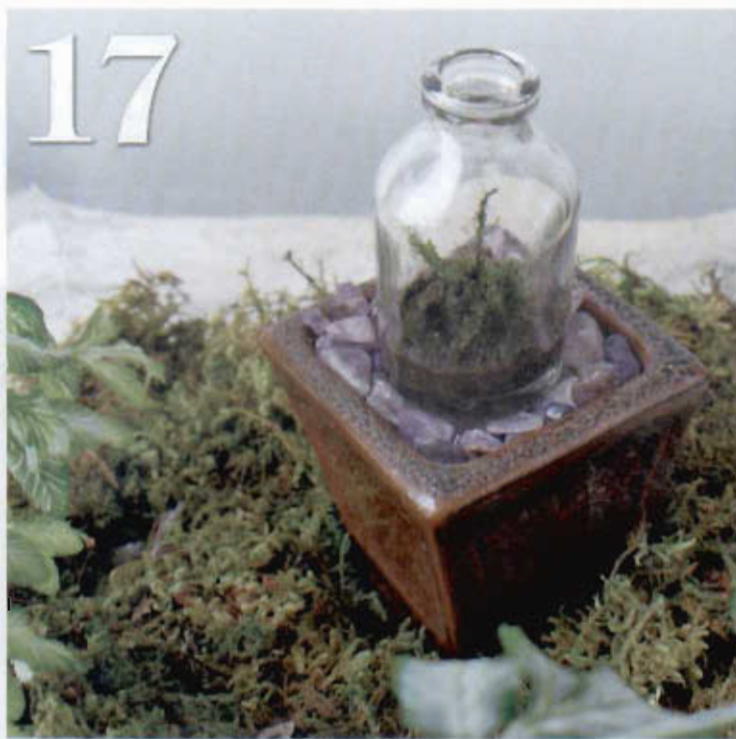
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# VIRGINIA GARDENER MAGAZINE

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## On the Cover

# 12

### Cool-Season Alternatives

*In this issue we take a look at plants to consider for fall, winter and even early-spring color.*

*Photo courtesy of bigstockphoto.com/colchiver*



## the flowers in winter

### Yes, it's possible to accent your four-season garden with flowers

Story by Joshua Dean Photos by Wayne Boyland, Merrifield Garden Center

Winter has its rewards in the garden. But there is no question that the transition from lush summer into colorful fall and finally frost-tinged winter can be especially bleak if one is accustomed to color year round. And while four-season gardens have their year-round charms – dried grasses, spent seed heads, colorful

exfoliating bark, berries and bold evergreen specimens – the mind, if not the heart, yearns for beds of flowers. Pansies and ornamental vegetables have long been used for winter bedding but the reality is that these plants take some time off during the coldest parts of the season and begin to show wear.

So what must one do to accent their four season garden with flowers – is it even possible? The answer is unequivocal: Yes! But because our winters in Virginia fluctuate between extremes, not only must the plants be thoroughly hardy, the garden must be designed to show off winter bedding.



Lenten rose comes in a variety of shades with 'Pink Lady' (facing page) and 'White Lady' (above) being two standouts.

This beautiful Christmas rose flowers when there seems no hope of spring.



We often design gardens with massed plantings to be at their peak during summer and early fall; think mounds of summer flowers and the movement of fall-flowering grasses. Winter beds are generally an afterthought, and only then a placeholder for the petunias and begonias of the spring and summer to come. But with forethought and a flexible mind, it is possible to delight in vivid winter flowers and intensely colored foliage.

While the notion that everything matters in the winter of a four-season garden is certainly part of this equation, areas long reserved for winter annuals can be transitioned into colorful staples that work with the larger garden design.

If a carpet of long-lasting flowers during the cold of winter is what you desire, hellebore species are your best bet. With a bloom time that spans the coldest months of the year, hellebores come to life just when there seems to be no hope of spring returning again. *Helleborus niger*, the Christmas rose, begins blooming in December with wonderfully bright white flowers. The foliage is evergreen and because this is a cool-season plant, it looks far better in January than it does in the heat of summer. The blossoms will persist into March and will begin to age into shades of pink and green about the time that *Helleborus orientalis*, the Lenten rose, springs forth.

Two new cultivars of Christmas rose are performing very well in Virginia gardens: 'Josef Lemper' and 'Jacob'. Both are white but feature different growth rates and habits. 'Josef Lemper' grows faster and taller while 'Jacob' is a bit smaller but no less vigorous. Other cultivars in this line are being developed so a winter trip to the garden center may reveal new winter delights.

The world of hellebores has been exciting these past few years with surprising new double cultivars coming on to the market. 'Double White' has been impressive for years while new doubles in every shade imaginable are now available. I recently planted 100 double cultivars in a garden and was stunned by the color range and the overall size and impressiveness of the flowers. It is easy to fall in love with these flowers.

Because hellebores excel in a dry shade environment and can take some sun at the right time of day, I often use them en masse as a ground cover – the bonus being that just at the time color is needed the most, they begin to bloom. This also comes closest to the look of a large bed of pansies or other annuals but the difference is that they appear lush and verdant on days when pansies might be taking a day off.

## winter roses

From December to May, hellebore cultivars can bring a surprising range of colors to the garden. Exciting new Christmas roses start the season out with elegance, while breathtaking new double Lenten roses end the season with singular beauty.

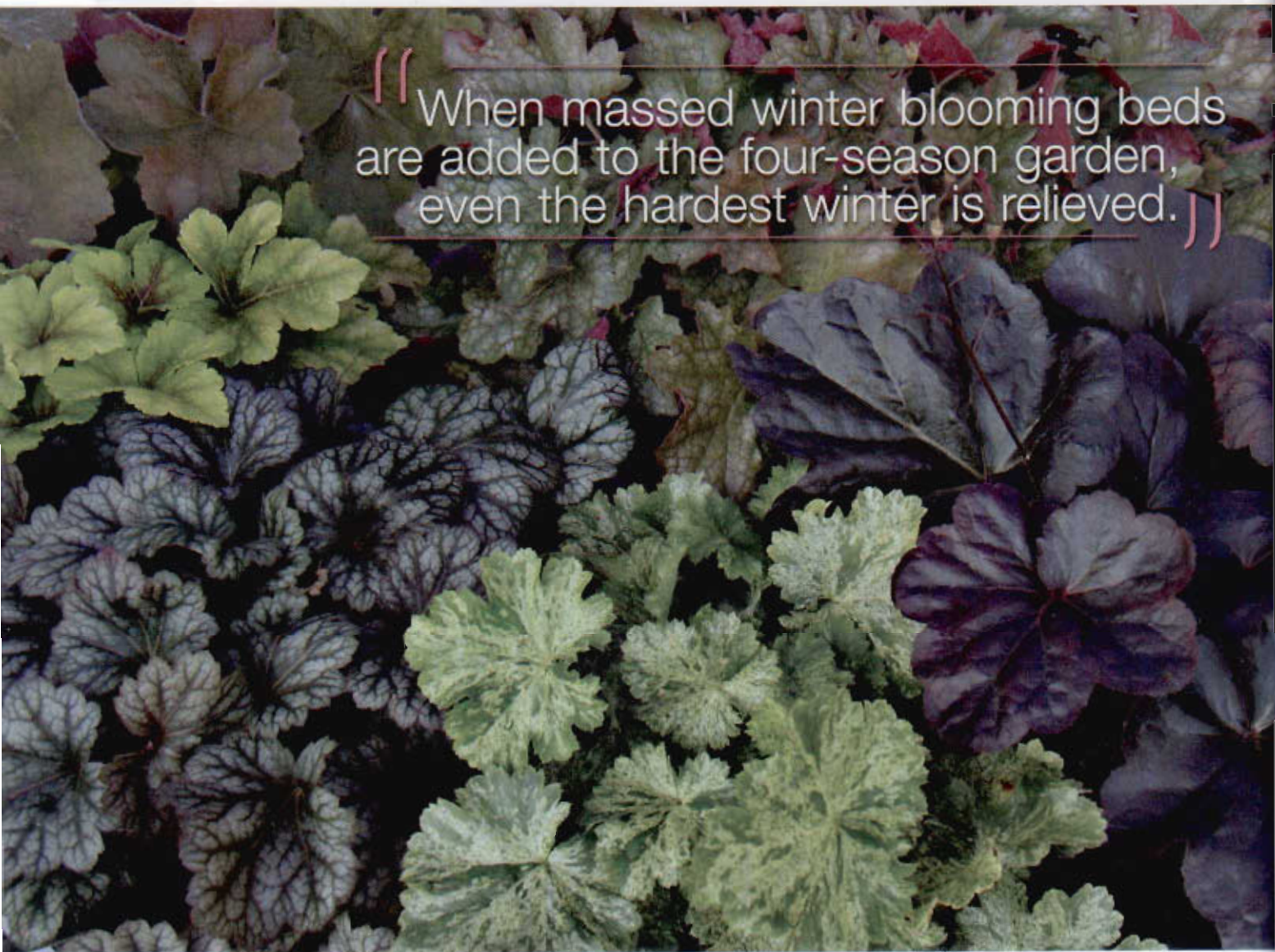
- 'Josef Lemper' – A vigorous white-flowered Christmas rose
- 'Jacob' – A slightly smaller white-flowered Christmas rose
- 'Joshua' – A dwarf Christmas rose
- 'Cotton Candy' – Wonderful double, shell-pink flowers
- 'Harlequin Gem' – Intense, dark pink margins fading to white at the center
- 'Double White' – Elegant layers of white blossoms
- 'Peppermint Ice' – Deep pink flowers with specks and deep margins
- 'Golden Lotus' – Creamy, soft yellow flowers
- 'Onyx Odyssey' – Surprising black to deep purple flowers
- 'Sparkling Diamond' – Multitudes of narrow petals remind me of 'Thalia' daffodils.
- 'WD Elegance White' – A patterned, deep reddish-purple speckled white blossom

And while hellebores are the most reliable flower for the winter, other elements like colored foliage and texture also present themselves as design options. For instance, one of the best foliage plants for any time of the year, heuchera gives late spring and early summer flowers with evergreen foliage. Yet the foliage is anything but just green: the leaves can be purple, pink, orange, chartreuse and even black. Some leaves are veined and variegated with a smoky texture while others bear a glossy, lustrous sheen.

One of my favorites is 'Georgia Peach' and true to its name it has the intense hues of ripe peaches. 'Southern Comfort' adds tones of fall color to the winterscape while the deep purple to black leaves of 'Obsidian' call out for contrasting winter hues. One interesting companion is *Lamium*, whose dusky, silvery leaves produce beautiful purple, pink



“When massed winter blooming beds are added to the four-season garden, even the hardest winter is relieved.”





△ *Heuchera* 'Rave On' is a good alternative to 'Palace Purple'.

**Facing page top:**

This *Heuchera* 'Mint Julep' would work well with contrasting dark green leaves.

**Facing page bottom:**

*Heuchera* comes in surprising shades including the smoky 'Midnight Bayou' and the glossy near black 'Obsidian'.

## winter bells

*Heuchera* cultivars have advanced to a state where surprising color combinations are now possible.

'Peach Flambé' – Bright peach-pink leaves

'Georgia Peach' – Near magenta veins on peach-pink leaves

'Obsidian' – Black leaves with a glossy sheen

'Amber Waves' – A rich orange and purple surprise

'Lime Marmalade' – A very light lime green for the garden

'Citronelle' – A reliable chartreuse that will brighten up any area

'Caramel' – The orange in these leaves can be paired with another heuchera to intensify the display of foliage.

'Southern Comfort' – Warm-toned large leaves bring autumn to mind.

'Midnight Bayou' – Purple variegated leaves are superior to the stalwart 'Palace Purple'.

and white blossoms in the spring. Try *Lamium* 'Purple Dragon' for beautiful flowers and silver leaves with green margins with 'Obsidian'. Other evergreen perennials with interesting textures to try include creeping phlox, false rock cress (*Aubrietia deltoidea*), sedum cultivars, *Stachys* 'Helen von Stein' (lamb's ears) and barrenwort (*Epimedium x rubrum*).

Two other foliage options which are decidedly more rare in the garden are *Arum italicum* and *Rohdea japonica*. *Arum* is a cool-season rhizome whose large, arrow-shaped leathery leaves are bright with variegation. If you have an area in the shade, this is an ideal plant. However, it will need a plant to pair with it for summer presence. *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' and hostas would be good

options. *Rohdea*, or sacred lily, has long evergreen strap-like leaves with a heavy texture. It too is at home in the shade garden. Its vertical habit provides a textural contrast to hellebores and heucheras. Its bright red berries appear in late fall and persist through winter.

Winter color can also be achieved with masses of low shrubs like *Nandina domestica* 'Harbor Belle', a newer cultivar that performs better than its predecessor 'Harbor Dwarf'. This plant functions as an evergreen ground cover that darkens with purple leaf tips in winter and retains the vibrant clusters of red berries of the species. Again, a massed planting of 'Harbor Belle' would benefit from a strong winter hardy perennial such as heuchera with its large leaves for contrast. One

note: I would caution against planting nandinas near walkways where snow might be piled on top of them during the dig out from winter storms.

When massed winter-blooming beds are added to the four-season garden, even the hardest winter is relieved. For instance, when I saw the nodding flowers of *Helleborus* 'Josef Lemper' – head held high emerging from the melting snow after this year's seemingly interminable blizzards, I knew there was hope for spring. But I hesitated a bit, knowing I would have to wait nearly a year to see those beautiful flowers again. ♡

*Joshua Dean is a writer and designs gardens for Merrifield Garden Center in Northern Virginia.*