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Carole McCray: The winter garden

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Gardening does not have to stop at the first sign of frost. Against winter's gray canvas, your garden can have hints of color, texture, size, shape and movement.

They are referred to as the ``bones'' of the garden - architectural structures such as a pergola, an arbor or other garden ornaments and plants such as evergreens or shrubs that lose their leaves and display showy, colorful bark and bright berries. Structures and plants serve a decorative function in the winter garden. When covered with snow, they clearly define and give interest to the garden in winter.

Shrubs, trees and vines offer vivid fall color and some will look their showiest in the fall with bright fruit and berries favored by birds throughout the winter. Those not preferred by birds will continue to brighten the winter landscape.

Popular hardy shrubs are holly (Ilex), barberry (Berberis thunbergii) and bayberry (Myrica Pennsylvanica). The glossy leaves and deep red berries on a holly brighten the winter garden. Barberry and bayberry drop their leaves in the winter, but both have showy berries; reddish-orange egg-shaped on barberry and a waxy gray green fruit on bayberry. Red-osier dogwood (Cornus sericea) is another shrub to consider for texture and color in the winter garden. Its red bark fades gradually to gray-green and later turns deep maroon red in the winter once leaves drop; showy against a snowy landscape.

In the winter garden, the tall, arching branches on rose bushes and butterfly bushes are lovely when dusted with snow. Their branches make great perches for the visiting birds.

Flowers in the garden are another consideration. I like sedums, succulent perennial plants with fleshy leaves in shades of blue green to gray green and burgundy. The flower heads appear in clusters comprised of tiny star-like flowers. They lend texture and shape to a winter garden. Pale pink flowers atop flower heads appear in late summer on Sedum (Herbsfreude) also known as ``Autumn Joy'' and turn to a coral red in the fall. On Sedum (Matrona) its light pink flowers fade to a bronzy shade. Both reach up to 2 feet and are one of many sedums to keep interest in the winter garden, and birds enjoy the toasty brown seedpods on the plants. New this year is Sedum ``Crystal Pink'' introduced by Terra Nova Nurseries. An improvement over ``Autumn Joy,'' its blooms hold together stronger and they are true to the plant's name, icy pink clusters atop 16-inch stems.

Flowering bulbs planted in the fall come to life in the winter garden. Hellebores (Helleborus spp., large cup-shaped flowers, often called Christmas rose or Lenten rose bloom in pink, creamy white and maroon. Also, emerging through the winter thaw are snowdrops (Galanthus nivalis) and glory-of-the-snow (Chionodoxa lucillae) brightening the early spring garden.

Ornamental grasses bring movement to the garden. Especially on a blustery winter day, grasses display motion and give their best performances in the winter garden. The austere winter landscape is ideal for showing them off. The bare composition of the winter garden is ideal for grasses such as Maiden grass (Miscanthus sinensis ``Gracillimus'' with silvery plumes and reaching to a height of 7 feet; Zebra grass (Miscanthus sinensis ``Zebrinus'' whose wide leaves banded horizontally with gold can go to 6 feet. Both grasses have long lasting foliage into late winter. Fountain grass (Pennisetum alopecuroides) is one of the most useful as a warm season grass looking good throughout the year and adding fullness to a winter garden with a height of 4 feet tall and just as wide.

Vines can be another element to introduce into the winter garden. Wisteria (Wisteria floribunda) is a deciduous, twining aggressive grower forming gnarled trunks and can reach as high as 40 feet. Its snow tipped bare branches are a lovely backdrop that gives winter interest against a heavy support such as pergola or sturdy arbor. Wintercreeper (Euonymus fortunei Var. Radicans) will become a climber if given the opportunity; lends winter interest to a fence or wall.

Even the herb garden holds winter interest. Dried seed heads of dill cling on tall stems. Lavender has faded from soft purple to a somber gray. I can gather winter savory during the colder months and some of the thymes. These herbs are snipped when the snow is not too deep and flavor a hearty winter soup or stew.

Garden benches, bird feeders, sundials, pergolas, trellises and arbors vie for attention in the winter garden, all adding to structural interest during the colder months. A heavy covering of snow can transform your garden ornaments and structures into curious and interesting shapes. My sundial topped with a foot of snow resembles a white cake and garden benches draped in heavy snow become a figure resting there.

If you choose only a few plants noted for color, shape and texture, your garden will be an interesting canvas, pleasing to you on snowy winter days.

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