

Planning for Winter Interest in Your Garden (published 2026-02-07)
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By mid-January your garden has been put to bed, you are beginning to plan your spring gardens, and pruning is completed until later in winter. A glance around your lawn with no bright spots to be seen can be hard for avid gardeners. We see winter gardening designs in our fall and winter publications and are reminded that there can be visual interest after autumn in our landscape.

Now is the time to plan your winter garden. Take a walk around your lawn and decide where winter garden interest is needed. Determining the location characteristics where the planting will go can help. Do you need a tree or shrub with winter interest, or a large area where foliage could be planted? Do you need small plants that may bloom late in the winter? Is there shelter or hard landscape that is required to protect the plant you choose? This is a perfect time to decide where you need a touch of color during the winter. It can be evergreen trees, or shrubs with winter interest, or a perennial winter blooming plant.

Evergreen perennials can be affected by factors summer perennials don't even notice. Desiccation or winter burn is the worst enemy of evergreen plants. The cold of winter and dry winds will affect winter evergreens by drying the leaves and making it difficult for the plant to absorb water through frozen ground. To help the plant survive, an extra layer of mulch will protect the plant from a deep freeze.

If you have poor drainage, the saturated ground can freeze leading to root rot. This can be avoided by positioning the plant in the garden where good drainage can occur and by amending the soil to be sure there will be good drainage.

Hellebores or Lenten roses are one of the favorite evergreen plants for winter blooms. They flower in late winter to early spring and are available in several colors – pink, purple, white, maroon, and yellow. The foliage is leathery and dark green. They are deer and rabbit resistant. The hellebore is easy to care for, requiring morning sun to dappled shade, rich moist soil, and pruning after blooming. Use caution when pruning as all parts of the plant are toxic and may cause irritation if contacting skin.

Camellias are one of my favorite blooming shrubs. They are evergreen with dark leathery leaves. By late summer the buds are forming, and they can bloom from late fall to spring. The camellia comes in many different colors from white, pink, and red. There are varieties that are hardy and will thrive in almost any garden location. The most important thing to remember is they like acidic soil and are sensitive to too much sun. Morning sun is the best for camellias. Do your research and find the camellia for your location and you won't be disappointed.

The Christmas fern is also another plant that has winter interest and will survive the cold of winter. The Christmas fern, like the hellebore, has dark leathery foliage. It is low maintenance, simply needing old foliage removed, and will tolerate dry soil.

Flowering shrubs like the Korean spice viburnum bloom early in the spring. The buds add color to the shrub and when they open, they fill the air with a sweet aroma. Be sure to plant the shrub where you can enjoy the fragrance.

Spring bulbs are also an early sign of spring coming. I began seeing daffodils peeking from the ground on January the 7th this year. It is amazing how they can tolerate the cold of 1-2 months and then deliver such wonderful yellow blooms for so long.

Other things to consider when planning interest for your winter garden are shrubs like the red or yellow twig dogwood that can add color and design to your landscape. Accent shrubs or interesting containers are another way to add interest to your landscape. Ornamental grasses can also add interest to your garden when they sway in the wind and their fine texture will soften your landscape. The fall color and seedheads add even more interest. The links below outline the benefits of grasses in the fall and winter garden. Be sure to do your research to choose the right ornamental grass for your landscape.

Please see the references below for more information and choices for making your winter garden a pleasure to see. Enjoy your garden!

“Evergreen Perennials: The Greening of Winter,”

<https://extension.psu.edu/evergreen-perennials-the-greening-of-winter>

“Trees and Shrubs for Fall and Winter Bloom,”

<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/extd8/files/documents/em9277.pdf>

“Perennials with Winter Interest,”

<https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/perennials-winter-interest>

“Trees and Shrubs with Colorful and Ornamental Bark,”

<https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/trees-and-shrubs-colorful-and-ornamental-bark>

“Ornamental Grasses for Tennessee Landscapes,”

<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2025/10/W874D.pdf>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.