

## COLOR IN THE WINTER GARDEN

By Marlys Bell

Unlike other seasons when there are great swaths of riotous flower color, the hues of winter are more subtle and found frequently in other forms such as berries, bark, foliage, seedpods and garden ornaments. Some of my favorite trees, shrubs and ornamental grasses that are easiest to grow, also provide the most colorful impact.

In addition to providing winter color, berries are welcome food for the birds. Some trees and shrubs to consider are the following:

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), native to this area, is an evergreen shrub or small tree with clumps of red or orange berries that are as showy as hollies. Chinese pistache is a very adaptable tree with yellow, red or orange fall foliage and wispy sprays of tiny red berries that ripen to blue-black. *Nandina* is also a useful shrub that comes in many sizes and shapes with red or orange berries for winter color.

Not all berries are red. Some shrubs have berries with other colors. The most eye-catching is *Callicarpa* (beautyberry) when it loses its leaves to expose clusters of intensely violet berries on gracefully arching branches. Growing to 5 feet tall and wide, it blooms and fruits on the current season's growth.

Other shrubs to consider are barberries. In addition to red or orange, some barberries have blue berries borne on last year's growth. Either deciduous or evergreen, in many different sizes from 18 inches to 10 feet tall, barberries can meet many needs in an informal garden. Look carefully at the plant description before deciding which one will be the "right plant for the right place."

Although elevation and the severity of the winter make it difficult to guarantee colorful foliage throughout the winter, some plants are reasonably reliable prospects. Two to consider are *Nandina* and *Mahonia*. *Nandina domestica* is an adaptable shrub with several varieties ranging from 2-6 feet tall with foliage that turns red when the weather gets cold. Most varieties appreciate some afternoon shade, have berries and feathery foliage and can acclimate to become drought tolerant.

*Mahonia* (oregon grape) is a native that's great for winter color. (In native plant books, it may be called *Berberis*, in other books, *Mahonia*). This evergreen shrub comes in 3 sizes, 3-7 feet tall, 1-3 feet tall and a groundcover, 1-2 feet tall. Creeping Mahonia (*Berberis aquifolium* var. *repans*), the groundcover, turns deep red in winter with leaves that look like holly. The larger Mahonias turn dark purple in winter. Although relatively slow growing, they are hardy, adaptable plants that prefer some shade in lower elevations.

Other foliage plants to consider for winter interest are ornamental grasses, which add movement, texture and quiet color. Consider the California State Grass, purple needle grass (*Nasella pulchra*) that is green until it starts blooming in late winter. It is drought tolerant, grows to about 3 tall, goes dormant in summer and prefers full sun.

Check with your local nursery for other grasses that grow well in the Mother Lode. There are many to consider, such as Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) and those from the *Miscanthus* and *Carex* species.

In winter, nothing is more stunning than the red branches of the native creek dogwood (*Cornus sericea*). It is a deciduous shrub that quickly grows to 15 feet in moist locations. The older, established crape myrtles also produce peeling, colorful bark worth a second look. And the mahogany bark of manzanitas, often overlooked in summer, takes on a special beauty with the low winter sun.

Spending time in the garden year-round provides opportunities for new insights and observations to stimulate planning and learning. Look for emerging buds, colorful stems, or unique bark, and take note of which plants have berries, seedpods and unusual forms or plant structure. Many of them have a special beauty or make their most significant contributions to the garden in winter. See you in the garden—even in winter!

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