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## PLANTING FOR WINTER INTEREST

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I used to hate winter. Any day that wasn't warm and sunny was a wasted opportunity to be outdoors, planting, transplanting and enjoying the sight of hundreds of flowers and the many shades of green a garden provides. Now, I'm older and wiser. I'm also willing to admit I need a break. I find myself looking forward to that time of year when the garden rests and so do I. I've learned, though, that winter doesn't have to be a dreary time of year. Some thoughtful plant selection can produce a winter landscape that is beautiful and exciting. There are many ways in which plants and trees can add interest to the winter landscape.

**Evergreen conifers** add color, texture, and architectural drama. They vary in size, shape and in the texture of their foliage. They may be tall, shrubby or weeping. They may have needle-type foliage like pine, spruce, fir, or hemlock, or have scale-like foliage like juniper and arborvitae. In contrast to the conifers, there are **broad-leaved evergreens** like Mexican abelia, *Abelia floribunda*, a shrub with a graceful, arching habit. It ranges in size up to 10 ft tall but is usually shorter. This abelia is often in full bloom in January.

Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unedo*, is another broadleaf evergreen tree or shrub. It grows to 8-35 feet with equal spread. It has red-brown shredding bark, dark green red-stemmed leaves, clusters of small urn-shaped flowers, and round red fruits that resemble strawberries. Both flowers and fruits may appear at the same time in fall and winter.

Boxwood, or *Buxus*, hybrids hold their green color well throughout winter. They are cold-hardy, grow from 3-5 ft high, 3-4 ft wide and need little pruning.

*Mahonia aquifolium*, or Oregon grape, is a bushy evergreen that grows to 6 ft high with a 5 ft spread. Scattered mature red leaves remain throughout the year. Leaves turn purple or bronze in winter. Yellow flowers appear in late winter, followed by edible blue-black grape-like fruit.

In the leafless season, **deciduous trees** get a chance to show off branch structure, bark patterns, and stem color. The branches of *Cornus nuttallii*, Pacific or Western dogwood, grow in an attractive horizontal pattern. *Cornus stolonifera*, Redtwig dogwood, has bright red twigs. Severe pruning encourages new branches and twigs for winter display. *Cornus stolonifera „Flaviramea“* produces yellow twigs and branches. Another tree notable for its coral red twigs and branches in winter is the Coral Bark Maple, *Acer palmatum „Sango Kaku“*. In winter we can especially appreciate the lovely bark of Crape Myrtle, *Lagerstroemia indica*, as well as Lacebark Elm, *Ulmus parvifolia*, and River Birch, *Betula nigra*. Not only is it a nice color, the bark of the River Birch flakes and curls in cinnamon-colored sheets. Paperbark Maple, *Acer griseum*, is another tree that sheds its bark in long, thin sheets.

Not until its leaves have fallen can we appreciate the twisted branches of Harry Lauder's Walking Stick, *Corylus avellana ‘Contorta’*. This deciduous shrub can reach 8-10 ft tall and wide. Flowering Cherry, *Prunus subhirtella „Autumnalis“*, is a 25-30 ft tall tree with pinkish-white flowers that often appear during warm spells in January.

For **winter flowers**, *Camellia japonica* tops the list. Choose this 6-12 ft tall tree according to its bloom season, early, mid or late. Witch hazel, *Hamamelis intermedia*, is a large deciduous shrub that flowers from December to March in shades of red, yellow, or orange. *Daphne odora*, or Winter Daphne, is a demanding evergreen shrub with



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fragrant pink flowers. Daphne needs porous soil, excellent drainage, some shade during the day, and little summer water.

Don't forget *Forsythia*, a fountain-shaped shrub whose bare branches are covered in yellow flowers beginning in February. Lovely yellow 1-inch flowers appear January to March on Winter jasmine, *Jasminum nudiflorum*, a deciduous vine. Another winter-flowering vine is Carolina Jessamine, *Gelsemium sempervirens*. Fragrant tubular yellow flowers appear in late winter. Carolina Jessamine can be trained on a trellis or used as a ground cover.

**Colorful berries** brighten the branches of many shrubs in winter. Metallic purple berry clusters decorate the arching branches of *Callicarpa*, or Beautyberry. The **bright red berries** of hollies (*Ilex* species), Cotoneaster, Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*), Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), and Firethorn (*Pyracantha* cultivars), add welcome splashes of color to the winter landscape.

Closer to the ground are the **perennials and bulbs** that offer colorful foliage and/or flowers in winter. Violas and violets, primrose (*Primula*), Iceland poppy (*Papaver*), Paludosum daisy (*Chrysanthemum paludosum*), and wallflower (*Erysimum*) are winter-flowering as are Winter iris (*Iris unguicularis*), Snowdrops (*Galanthus*), and Siberian Squill (*Scilla siberica*).

#### References:

*Sunset Western Garden Book*  
UC Davis Arboretum

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