

# Winter beauty in your landscape

Color, texture, and contrast in a winter garden.

PHOTOS AND ARTICLE BY DEREK THOMAS



Paper Birch's bark has a ghostly glow in the winter landscape.

The beautiful flowers of fall have faded. Frost has withered even our toughest annuals. Our show stopping perennials have had their final encore. The ghostly silhouettes of stark leafless trees have replaced the beautiful fall foliage. Our lush landscapes are beginning to take on that grayer feel that confirms winter is here.

There are many things to keep a gardener busy during the early winter; amending soils, final pruning, and the last clean up of the season. However when considering our fall tasks many gardeners forget that January is a great time to plant a tree or shrub in your landscape. Trees and shrubs are dormant and if the ground is not frozen you can easily dig the hole and get your new plant in and settled before the first robins return in spring.

Another reason that planting now is a good idea is that you can pick trees that have beautiful

winter bark. Plant beauty does not only come in the form of lush green foliage.

The following list is some of my favorite picks for winter beauty. You can add plants that will provide you with everything from wonderful peeling bark to attractive evergreen foliage and red berries. These plants shine and glow in our otherwise quiet, wintry gardens.

## Paper Birch, *Betula papyrifera*.

This is perhaps the toughest of all birch species. It is found natively throughout the Northeast, the South and in parts of the Midwest. It is very tolerant of poorly drained soil, heat, humidity, and an array of pests. River birch can be found along riverbeds in our area. They thrive in the very moist, silty soils. This Birch has a beautiful cinnamon to creamy brown flaking bark that becomes darker with age. It gets to be large and

is a great shade tree in the summer garden. Due to its ease of care, disease and drought resistance and beautiful, peeling bark it is one of the best Birches in the winter garden.

## Kousa Dogwood, *Cornus kousa*.

This dogwood blooms about three weeks later than the native dogwood. The blooms are just as memorable and give quite a different show since they emerge after the tree's leaves have opened. Both species are known for their showy flowers, colorful fall display and red berries. The Kousa has a habit of forming a more multi-bough, umbrella shaped, medium canopy that is very attractive when planted as a specimen tree. The most striking aspect of the Kousa is its beautiful flaking bark that displays various shades of tan, gray and brown. The picture-perfect growth habit and bark make the Kousa Dogwood a memorable addition to the winter landscape.

## Gold Dust Plant, *Acuba japonica* 'Variegata'

This shrub is a good example of the beauty that broad leaf evergreens add to the landscape. This variety has dark green shiny leaves with irregular splotches, freckles, and splashes of gold to yellow. The patterns are reminiscent of a painter's canvas. The green stems are thick and smooth. The gold dust plant will easily reach 6 to 10 feet high with a spread that is slightly less. Plant in partial shade in well-drained soil and add ample organic matter annually. Placing it in full sun will cause bleaching or scalding of the leaves. Cuttings can be harvested and used for decorations during the holiday season.



Acuba adds color and contrast in winter's stark landscape.

## Camellia, *Camellia sasanqua*

Camellias are close relatives to the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*); they are beautiful, glossy, dark leaved evergreen, shrubs that have many different flower colors and types to choose from. The flowers range from white to pink to red and some have two colors on the same flower. The flowers are single, semi-double, and double and can mimic other flowers like peonies or roses. The species *sasanqua* blooms in the late fall to early winter. In our Washington gardens you can have blooms in mid to late December depending on the mildness of early winter. Plant all camellias in well-protected areas since winter winds can burn the leaves. In our gardens the best exposure is western or northern. They will thrive in moist well-drained acidic soil high in organic compost.

## Mahonia, *Mahonia japonica*

This close relative of barberry has a very pre-historic look and feel. Their leaves are thick and leathery and have an artificial appearance that commands a closer inspec-



Fall Camellia adds color when most plants are going dormant.

tion. The leaves are composite leaflets that are very spiny and together make up the entire leaf. Plant will grow 6 to 10 feet high with a very irregular growth pattern. In late winter to early spring clusters of fragrant, yellow flowers appear. They are quite showy when in bloom. The fruit that appears when the blossoms fade are small deep blue berries that provide a treat in early spring for many birds. Grow in well-drained acidic soils in the partial shade.

### Heavenly Bamboo, *Nandina domestica*

The common name that has been give to this native of China may deter many gardeners from planting it. However, rest assured that this plant is not related to the aggressive bamboo plants. In fact this plant forms a rather neat clump as it matures. The dark shiny green leaves are sets of leaflets and the appearance is graceful and fern like. The foliage is evergreen and changes color to beautiful shades of reds in the winter. The white clusters of springtime flowers mature into grape-like bunches of red berries in fall. If left on the plants the berries will last the entire winter. The culture of this plant makes it a must for anyone looking for a low maintenance attractive addition to the landscape. It will grow in many soil types and light exposures and is very tolerant of dense shade. Regular prun-



#4 Nandina's red berries add a pop of red to an other wise dull winter palate.

dormant. In fact the late fall and early winter is just as full of beautiful landscape plants as any other time of year. So during the next visit to your garden center or nursery, ask them to show you the plants that have winter interest. I am confident you will be surprised how many choices there are to help you bring winter beauty to you garden. Enjoy.

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ing by removing the entire oldest cane will help to keep young shoots coming.

### Western Arborvitae, *Thuja plicata*

This arborvitae has a wonderful pyramidal growth habit. It is evergreen, and has an emerald green to golden cast on its leaves. This large shrub is perfect for use in screening and can mature to 50 feet tall. However it responds quite well to pruning and can be sheared into a very attractive hedge. During the winter it is quite durable to the damaging weight of snow. It is also very tolerant of either full sun or shade. This is a great replacement for the often over-used Leyland Cypress. Give this shrub moist well-drained fertile soil and watch it thrive.

These are just a few of the great choices for winter beauty. We could add to it plants that flower in the winter, plants that begin to grow in the fall and have their best foliage by Mid February, and plants that never truly go

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