

Summer seemed to linger longer than normal this year, but Fall finally arrived bringing vibrant colors and a winding down of gardening activities. Most gardeners give a sigh of relief as they contemplate taking a break from the work and travails of the long growing season. But then we look out the window and realize how much we miss the vibrant greens, yellows, pinks and reds of summer. Everything becomes brown and gray and, seemingly, uninteresting.

Appreciating the winter landscape requires a bit of a mental adjustment. Its subtleties of color, texture and shape have a beauty of their own, and there are some things that we can do to make that winter landscape a little more interesting and enjoyable. Some modest planning, research and planting in the Fall or Spring can help to brighten our view as we look out our windows.

Obviously, evergreens come to mind immediately, with conifers such as spruce, pine and firs at the forefront. These are always possibilities, but keep in mind that many of them, while cute and green for several years, will ultimately be very large trees that may overwhelm a typical yard. Instead, let's think about smaller evergreens and the color and texture of fruits and branches of other shrubs and plants.

Hollies are a good place to start, but think beyond the prickly leafed hollies often found at local nurseries. *Ilex glabra* or inkberry is a good start. It has smooth, oval, dark green leaves with small black berries and, when not pruned, typically grows to about 8 ft. wide and tall.

However, there are others in the holly family which are not evergreen, yet would still be colorful additions to your winter yard. *Ilex verticillata*, or winterberries do not retain their foliage, but are renowned for their abundant display of bright, red, berries that persist through much of the winter. Planted in small or large groupings, they are a show stopper. Additionally, some of the available cultivars of winterberry produce yellow or orange berries, if that's more to your liking. One thing to note, winterberries flower and fruit on female plants, and require at least one male plant for a maximum of 6-10 female plants in order to produce berries.

Another way to provide interest in your yard is to include plants with interesting bark, branching or shapes. *Cornus sericea*, red twig dogwoods, grow to about 9 ft. and do not have interesting flowers, but rather their winter bark is a deep red that can be appreciated anytime, but especially when there is snow on the ground. Additionally, some cultivars, like *Cornus sericea*, Flaviramea, which is somewhat smaller at 5-6 ft., have bright yellow bark and, like their red cousin, are stunning as individual plants or in groups.

And lastly, architectural interest in your yard and gardens can be maintained into the winter, by a little benign neglect. That lovely oakleaf hydrangea, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, that you enjoyed during the Summer and Fall will remain interesting as a sculptured shape with its upright stance, large conical dried flower heads and the exfoliating bark of its mature stems. The same is true for grasses and other perennials. Grasses like Little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, 12 inches tall or Prairie dropseed, *Sporobolus heterolepis*, 3 ft. tall, planted as specimens, in groups or along edges will provide dramatic silhouettes and interest as they sway and move in the winter winds.

As a bonus to this approach, and contrary to the gardening wisdom from decades ago, it is not harmful to leave these plants undisturbed over the winter, it actually provides valuable food and shelter for the native birds and insects throughout the cold months.

So take some time to research these plants and many others, to see if they would be compatible with the conditions in your yard, and start planning and planting for your winter landscape.

One other note, Penn State Cooperative Extension's lists of native perennials, categorized by light and moisture requirements can be found on-line or by contacting the Extension office at YorkMG@psu.edu.

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