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Attractive Bark Can Give Your Landscape Bite

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GARDEN NOTES

ATTRACTIVE BARK CAN GIVE YOUR LANDSCAPE BITE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Spring - 47

Fall and winter give you a chance to appreciate some of the overlooked aspects of trees and shrubs. Without all those gaudy leaves and flowers vying for your attention, you can notice the subtle charms of bark.

There are a number of trees and shrubs that do have spectacular bark, and seem to thrive and look good even through our Utah winters, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Consider putting at least a couple of plants in the landscape that have some aesthetic value even when all the foliage is long gone.

“One of my favorites is the paper bark maple,” he says. “I wasn’t that impressed with this tree until I saw a simply stunning specimen at the Arnold Arboretum back east. The bark is cinnamon to red in color, and exfoliates in paper thin sheets. Not only is the bark really interesting, but the tree is a wonderful vase shape and has attractive foliage.”

“The paper bark maple is a small tree, only reaching a height of 30 feet with a slightly smaller spread. This slow-growing tree can take a few years before it really shows its brilliant color. It should be planted in a well-drained soil if possible, and watered deeply and infrequently.”

The coral-bark Japanese maple (Sango Kaku) also has attractive bark, Goodspeed adds. It does not peel like its cousin the paper bark maple, but its nice pink to red color is attractive year round. The color is more evident in the new twigs than the older wood. This small, slow-growing tree reaches a mature height of about 20 feet. It prefers a semi-shady, protected location with good drainage. It has a very open vase shape, and nice fall color. Like most Japanese maples, the foliage is also very attractive.

Most birches are known for their wonderful bark, whether it is white or a reddish-brown, he says. The major problem with white-barked birch trees is their susceptibility to the bronze birch borer. The red or river birch has brown to orange colored bark that defoliates exposing a lighter, almost golden color underneath. Another nice quality about the river birch is its ability to thrive in almost any soil. It grows up to 70 feet tall in some parts of the country, but doesn't usually grow over 40 feet high here in the Intermountain area.

“One tree that I seldom see growing in this area, but would like to see more of, is the

lacebark pine,” Goodspeed says. “There are some beautiful specimens of this tree on the east and west coast, and they are hardy enough for our area. The bark has a sort of mottled look, resembling the bark on a plane tree. This tree can grow up to 50 feet tall, so it needs plenty of room to grow.”

Along with trees that have interesting bark, there are also a number of shrubs with fantastic colored stems and twigs, he says. The red twig dogwood is the most popular, and for good reason. In Utah canyons this native plant has bright red twigs that are very striking against a blanket of snow. They can grow almost anywhere, and reach a height of between four and eight feet tall.

Many of the willows that grow in our area, both native and exotic, can have attractive stems, Goodspeed says. Some are purple, while others are a golden color. Willows can vary in height from four to almost 15 feet tall. They can adapt to many different growing conditions, and may become a nuisance if they are allowed to take over an area.

There are also a couple of small evergreen shrubs that hold their colorful leaves throughout much of the winter, providing some bright color for the landscape, he adds. Heavenly bamboo and Oregon grape are just two of the most colorful. In the fall the heavenly bamboo turns a brilliant red color, and it still brings life to the landscape as the leaves poke through the snow. The Oregon grape is also adds attractive purple and deep green tones to any winter scenery.

Take a good look around the neighborhood this winter to see the trees and shrubs that are interesting and still look good despite the snow and cold, Goodspeed suggests. Then, find out what they are and consider planting one or two of them in your landscape in the spring. Next winter you will be glad you did.

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