Winter Color in the Garden

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Describe the winter landscape and most people think of grays, browns and other bland colors. It seems ironic that the once brilliant colors of just a few weeks ago have faded into oblivion. Given a little imagination, it does not have to be this way.

Winter color and landscape interest come from many different plants. It also come from many different parts of the plants including fruits, buds and bark on deciduous trees and leaves, needles and other structures on evergreens.

Bark is certainly one of the most durable of the winter colors. Many plants with striking bark become even more vivid after the leaves fall. Once leaves are no longer there to obstruct the view, they are excellent landscape assets.

At the top of the list is an excellent native plant. The very hardy Red Twig dogwood (Cornus sericea) has bark that turns fiery red to burgundy in the winter. It grows to 6'-10' tall and 5'-10' wide but dwarf varieties are available.

Another dogwood variety is Yellow Twig Dogwood (Cornus sericea 'Flaviramea'). This plant features long branches with striking bright yellow or chartreuse colors. As an added bonus, these native plants can withstand grazing by wandering deer.

Another rich red bark comes from the red birches. Eastern river birch (Betula nigra) and the western water birch (Betula occidentalis) are both covered with rich burgundy bark with interesting patterns. Many of the birch trees have an additional feature as they shed their bark in strips on the trunks.

Paper birch (Betula papyrifera) peels off in white strips, and Yellow birch (Betula alleghaniensis) yields shiny gold bark. Also consider 'Heritage' with salmon color bark. European white birch (Betula pendula) has a striking white bark although the trees are short lived in our area.

Another underutilized tree for textured bark is the true Chinese or Lacebark Elm (Ulmus parvifolia). The trunk shows a mottled bark of gray, green, orange, and brown.

Two maples also show outstanding bark texture. Paperbark maple (Acer griseum) has a lovely exfoliating bark that has a rich reddish color that complements the interesting texture.

Coral Bark Japanese maple (Acer palmatum 'Sango-kaku') has a rich orange colored bark that is striking as the leaves fall from the tree at this time of year.

Many gardeners think of crabapples (Malus) as showy spring plants. While most plant them for their flowers, do not overlook their fall beauty. Many varieties produces possess attractive fruit.

To avoid messy fruit that covers the ground, always select those with persistent fruit that stays on the tree until the birds eat them during the winter.

Crabapple varieties with striking gold fruit include 'Bob White' with yellow-orange that turns gold in winter. This is the best of the available yellow-fruited cultivars. 'Winter Gold' and 'Harvest Gold' also have striking yellow fruit that shows off in the winter landscape.
If you prefer the red or orange fruit varieties, consider these. 'David' has scarlet fruit but it usually bears every other year. 'Donald Wyman' shows a very attractive red winter fruit display with attractive exfoliating bark.

'Indian Magic' has showy red orange fruit with an excellent display. Other showy red fruited varieties include 'Sugar Tyme,' 'Red Jewel,' 'White Angel,' and 'Jewelberry.'

Another group of small, flowering trees that possess attractive fruit is the hawthorns. These produce white or pink flowers in spring. In fall, their fruit turns orange or red and persists well into winter.

There are three hawthorns with excellent fruit displays. The Washington hawthorn (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*) and Winter King hawthorn (*Crataegus viridis 'Winter King*) have many smaller berries while Lavelle hawthorn (*Crataegus lavellii*) has fewer but larger berries.

Several shrubs also show excellent winter color. The American cranberry bush viburnum (*Viburnum trilobum*) is an excellent large shrub. It grows 8 to 12 feet tall and is excellent for screens and hedges. These shrubs produce white, flat-topped clusters of flowers in spring that then turn a bright red in fall.

While the pyracantha or firethorn shrub is not on everyone’s favorite list because of the thorns, you cannot argue that the brilliant orange berries are stellar showstoppers for the winter landscape. To avoid huge overgrown plants, look for some of the newer, more dwarf forms.

Do not overlook holly plants. Several hybrid broadleaf evergreen hollies, collectively known as the Meserve hybrid hollies (*Ilex x meserveae*) can grow here if your soil is not too alkaline.

'Blue Prince,' 'Blue Princess,' 'China Boy,' and 'China Girl' are hardy to -10 to -20 degrees (USDA Hardiness Zone 5).

All of these hollies are susceptible to winter desiccation injury. Bright sun and dry, cold winds will quickly dry out the leaves and cause them to drop. Plant them all in protected areas, such as the east or north side of a house or fence.

Hollies are dioecious plants so the male and female flowers are on different plants. That means you need at least two to get berries. Only the female plants have the berries you will likely want to have more of than the males.

If you are in downtown Salt Lake City, check out the chokeberry plants (*Aronia arbutifolia*) around the LDS Conference Center This is an uncommon plant in our area, but the an upright, spreading shrub has excellent red berries in fall. The name comes from the astringent taste of the fruit.

The brightly colored fruit of many of the aforementioned trees and shrubs do not remain throughout the winter. Extreme winter cold causes the fruit to turn brown or black.

Hungry birds and squirrels dine on the fruit. The spectacular late fall and early winter are certainly worth including these plants in your landscape.

Ornamental grasses are outstanding winter plants. These have tall thin stems and fluffy tops that stay attractive through much of the winter. Use *Miscanthus, Panicum* or Calamagrostis grasses or plant the plume grass (*Erianthus ravennae*) grows to 8 -11’ tall.

Many roses display beautiful hips in winter. Shrub roses like 'Bonica', 'Carefree Beauty' and 'Golden Wings' and Rugosa roses like 'Fru Dagmar Hastrup', 'Jens Munk', and 'Rubra' offer a colorful fruit show.