

Native Winter Gardens

Cindy Gilberg

A crispy clear day in late fall is one of the most wonderful times to walk in our many natural areas. After the leaves drop, the view into the woodlands opens up and reveals all sorts of fascinating views that had been obscured in summer. In the glades and prairies the colors become muted as grasses turn golden orange to brown and seed heads darken. Flocks of birds are everywhere taking advantage of a smorgasbord of seeds and berries. We are so blessed with a diversity of habitats and native plants that life is never dull not even in the winter.

Walk also in your garden, observing whether there are features that attract attention. Take note of areas that may need the additions of plants, stone or even an aged urn. Don't be too tidy in the garden at this time of year. Plant structure – seed heads, pods, dried stems and leaves etc – provide interest through the winter. In addition, this is an important



source of seed for food and the plants offer much needed cover for animals that overwinter here. Upon close inspection of stems, you may find a chrysalis, cocoon or egg case of a praying mantis. Snow falling and settling upon the dried plants can also create an intriguing winter scene.

Many of our native trees and shrubs have berries that are brightly colored as a signal for birds to come and feast. Add in a few of these since the berries tend to ripen at different times and with different berry color. The timing of the ripening in part determines which birds visit. Migrating birds gather berries and seeds that are ripening in fall while the overwintering birds feed on berries that ripen later as well as seeds that hang on or have fallen to the ground.

The aptly named beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) bears lustrous, purple berries from October through December. This 5' shrub seems to be quite happy growing in light shade as well as full sun, making it a versatile choice for the landscape. Since we are at the northern reaches of its hardiness, some winters are harsh enough to cause some die back, much like butterfly bush and crepe myrtle. Simply wait until early spring to remove any dead stems. Beautyberry has large leaves, offering a pleasant backdrop to many of the finer textured perennials such as aromatic aster, sedges, prairie dropseed grass or even woodland ferns.

Perhaps the showiest of the berry producers is the winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) named for its abundant fruit that ripens in early winter. While many cultivars are available, the native winterberry is just as beautiful as any. Berries are only produced on female plants so be sure that you have both male and female plants in your garden. Winterberry is a multi-trunk, large shrub with a height of about ten feet.

Flowering dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) are generally a woodland favorite for their large white flowers in spring but are equally valuable for their bright red berries in late fall. The fruit attains its full color in October, coinciding with the dogwood's beautiful red leaves. Gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*) has white berries in fall that are complimented with bright red stems. This six to eight foot tall dogwood is densely branched and grows like a hedge. It is an excellent screening alternative to plant in open woods after invasive honeysuckle has been removed.

Many of the shorter sedges are semi-evergreen right on through the winter. A few to look for are blue sedge (*Carex glaucoidea*) or white tinged sedge (*Carex albicans*). These are both low-growing sedges (6" – 12" tall) that grow well in part sun to light shade and average soil. The grass-like foliage blends well with other woodland plants such as wild ginger, columbine and Solomon's seal. Also semi-evergreen is the Christmas fern (*Polystichum arctostichoides*). Though it resembles Boston fern it is a totally reliable hardy fern that is tolerant of dry shade and average soil.

Later in winter, around February, the fragrant, ginger-yellow flowers of witch hazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*) open and tease us with spring. This small tree (10' to 15') is an important early source of pollen for insects that brave a warm winter day to forage. Happy in both full sun and light shade, witch hazel typically grows in moist soil. If it is planted in a drier location, extra compost will help hold moisture in the root zone.

Stone in the garden creates a depth of winter interest that few other elements can add. An old Chinese adage says "Stones are the bones of heaven and earth" and so should be an integral part of a garden. Use stone to mimic natural outcroppings on a hillside or as an accent in other settings. Natural stone walls, walkways and patios can be integrated to create a strong backbone for the garden. Use the same kind of stone for a project so that the view flows easily without visual confusion. Mosses and lichens typically grow on stone in shady gardens, adding even more character. On warm winter days, moss will warm up to a rich emerald green color on stones and the soil surface. Moss can be encouraged to grow by spraying the surface with a water/buttermilk solution and then placing the moss on top. Keep it moist during drier times and it will take hold and spread in the spring.

Winter allows a gardener the opportunity to sit back and reflect not only on what was wonderful in the garden but also on what might make the garden even better next year. Relax now, for surely in the spring a long list of new plants and ideas will be waiting.