

Four Seasons Gardening

by Mark Gilliland - for The Hudson Independent

Winter. The leaves have fallen, the perennials have died back. The days are short. Perhaps there are a few patches of snow in the cold shadows from the last storm. Looking out your window at the remains of this year's garden reveals a forlorn landscape of desolation and decay.

Sure, there are a few hardy perennials that can provide hopeful patches of green in the overall brown and white. My own garden includes arum lily (*Arum italicum* "Pictum"), hellebore (*Helleborus orientalis* "Red Hybrids") and common ground covers such as ajuga, vinca and pachysandra. I also rely on Japanese sedge (*Carex* ssp.), an evergreen variegated grass.

But wintertime is also a special moment for your garden: it clearly reveals the underlying structure and form of your landscape. Gone are the distractions of spring and summer flowers. Instead, you see the bare "bones" of your garden experience: size, shape, rhythm, texture, density, space. This is the best time to take stock of your garden's overall organization and layout.

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The major sources of structure in your garden come from hardscape — paths and walkways, steps, walls and other structures — as well as from evergreen and deciduous shrubs and trees. The paths and walls shape overall space and lead your eye from one area to another. Evergreens help form edges and boundaries or they may serve to generate visual rhythm within a bed or create specific accents.

Consider a formal English herb garden for example: stone or gravel paths lead in from four directions to a central focal area, which may be planted or contain a fountain or sculpture. Typically, boxwood (*Buxus*) will be used around the perimeter to form the visual boundaries, but also will be used as evergreen "sentries" where the paths meet the central area.

When deciduous trees and shrubs lose their leaves, their overall form is revealed for greater appreciation. Take a careful look. Shrub forms and textures are important to your garden's overall winter impact. Consider two common summer-flowering shrubs: *Spiraea japonica* is typically finely branched with a dense rounded shape. *Weigela*, on the other hand, is open, sparsely branched and more "scraggly." Although the two can be the same general size when leafed out in the summer, in the winter the *Spiraea* has a stronger presence.

Gardeners also try to develop an eye for more subtle interest: bark, berry, twig color and texture, seed heads and other more ephemeral effects, such as the pattern of fresh snow on branches or the sparkle of frozen droplets hanging like little crystal Christmas ornaments.

Many gardeners do not cut back perennials or dead-head shrubs in the fall so they can enjoy their dried forms — perennial seed heads (coneflower, astilbe), dried shrub flowers (hydrangea) and ornamental grasses with their dried plumes swaying in the wind.

They not only provide visual interest but can also provide an ecological benefit in terms of food source and winter habitat.

Finally, don't forget man-made accents — sculpture, arbors, pergolas, benches and, for the wildlife, birdbaths and feeders. All of these man-made forms take on even more design importance in the winter. Consider the design, shape and color of each — the unexpected splash of a bright red bench or a blue garden gate might be just the ticket for your garden.

Mark Gilliland is the owner of Garden Artistry, a landscape design firm in Westchester.

Plants for the Winter Garden

Bark and Twig

Paperbark Maple (*Acer griseum*)
Coral Bark Maple (*Acer palmatum* “Sango Kaku”)
Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*)
Heritage Birch (*Betula nigra* “Heritage”)
Kousa Dogwood (*Cornus kousa*)
Redtwig and Yellowtwig Dogwood (*Cornus alba*)
Ornamental Cherry (*Prunus* ssp.)
Stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamellia*)

Winter Blooming Flowers

Flowering Quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*)
Witchhazel (*Hamamelis* “Arnold Promise,” “Jelena,” “Diane”)
Black Pussy Willow (*Salix melanostachys*)
Dawn Viburnum (*Viburnum x bodnatense* “Dawn”)

Berries and Fruit

Red Chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia*), long lasting red berries.
Beautyberry (*Callicarpa*), bright violet berries.
Winterberry Holly (*Ilex verticillata* “Red Sprite,” “Winter Red,” “Winter Gold”)
Viburnum ssp.
Bayberry (*Myrica pennsylvanica*), grayish white fruit.
Firethorn (*Pyracantha angustifolia*), orange red berries.
Crabapple (*Malus* ssp.)
Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)

Evergreens

Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*)
Juniperus (Juniper), many varieties, blue and white berries.
Leucothoe (*Leucothoe axillaris*), bronze winter foliage.
Gold Dust Plant (*Aucuba japonica* “Variegata”)
Magnolia ssp.
Spruce (*Picea* ssp.)
Alleghany Viburnum (*Viburnum x rhytidophylloides* “Allegheny”)
Japanese Andromeda (*Pieris japonica* “Mountain Fire”)

A great source book is “Wonders of the Winter Landscape” by Vincent A. Simeone, Director of Planting Fields, Arboretum State Historic Park.