

The Winter Garden – a Wreath of Color and Texture

By Richard Sidy
President
Gardens for Humanity

When most people think of color in the garden they think of sunny bursts of flowers, fresh buds and ripening fruit. The winter garden has of course a more somber and textured mood like the low angle of light of shorter days, glowing silhouettes of plants with longer shadows.

An apt symbol for the winter garden in our area is a holiday wreath. Sprigs of evergreen, grey-green shrub oak, small cones of cypress or pine, red and purple berries, silver-blue lavender, twigs of manzanita, rosemary with its blue blossoms, purple hued holly-like leaves of mahonia or barberry, feathery wormwood, white berried mistletoe, electric silver-blue juniper berries, all built on a framework of bare brown grape vines.

Color in the winter garden can be a palate of multi-hued foliage against a background of golden buff shades of dry grasses or contrasting with the dark background of evergreen shrubs. While violets and pansies turn brave and colorful faces to the sun in winter pots and beds, frosty night temperatures and shorter days turn many green shades of leaves to hues of red, violet and purple. The pads of cacti, gray turquoise green in hot dry summers, put on shades of deep reddish purple, perhaps to better absorb warmth from briefer sun exposure.

Having a vibrant and colorful garden at any time of year takes planning. For winter color one needs to establish hardy plants with interesting foliage. A predominant color for high desert environments is silver-blue-green. Think lavender, sages, herbs, euphorbias, many native shrubs, cacti and sedums. These all thrive in hot summer days as well as in frigid winter nights. They are well adapted to extremes of hot, cold, wet and dry.

For color, fragrance, texture and hardiness, choose herbaceous plants and shrubs: Artemisia of all types, from small and frilly natives like sand sage to mounds of silver-blue wormwood, add fragrant textures and colorful accents. Sages of many varieties love our climate and soil, are drought tolerant and animal proof, and give the bonus of spring and summer flowers that attract bees and butterflies. The leaves of perennial penstemons have variety of color and texture in winter and their summer blooms – red, pink, purple – are vibrant, attracting hummingbirds.

Mounds of santolina, lavender, rue and rosemary; perennial herbs such as thyme, oregano, and sage; natives like horehound, snakeweed and buckwheat, yuccas and cacti are beautiful against a backdrop of dormant buff-colored native grasses like blue grama. Seedlings of many summer annuals are already starting to pop out of soil and mulch, adding their brilliant greens to the austere winter palate.

In winter, bulbs are already sending up strong spiky new leaves, and many surprise with early blooms like paperwhite narcissus (by Christmas) and crocus (February).

Patches of Iris with their green-grey blades stand like swords in frigid air. Winter bloomers like native manzanita will soon have clusters of pink-white bell-shaped blooms, creeping vinca will show blue star flowers against their mat of dark green leaves and wild violas will soon have fragrant purple blooms.

If you planted your fall vegetable garden expect to have salad greens of many shapes and shades – from purple and dark green to chartreuse. Asian greens and cabbages, parsley, chard of rainbow colors, kales from purple to grey-green, radishes carrots and frizzy endive are as interesting in texture and beautiful in colorful as they are delicious. If you got your garlic in by November, their strong green shoots should by now be almost a foot tall.

The goal of Gardens for Humanity is to help people of all ages develop the skills, knowledge, awareness and desire to garden and care for the environment. We celebrate the human interaction with the beauty of nature through art, gardening and community.

In January we offer two workshops on Saturday, January 10. At 10 am learn how to prune your fruit trees for the spring, and at 2 pm learn how to become a back yard water steward and grow more abundance with less water. For more information about our January workshops, and to learn more about our programs visit our website www.gardensforhumanity.org