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Features

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Bark, Berries & Stems

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As fall transitions into winter and the last leaves drop from the garden, many of the plants that provided color and interest throughout the growing season fade into the background. But the winter landscape doesn't have to be bare. Trees and shrubs with colorful bark, persistent berries and vibrant stems can bring texture, structure and color to the garden throughout the coldest months of the year.

Textured Bark

One of my favorite examples is also one of the very first plants I added to my garden more than 20 years ago. Just off my back patio is a paperbark maple, *Acer griseum*, which has stunning, peeling, coppery bark 12 months out of the year. Today, the tree is about 25-ft. tall with a spread of about 15 ft. In the fall, the foliage turns shades of orange and red before ultimately falling and revealing the stunning bark. Closely related, with more tawny-colored bark, is the three-flowered maple, *Acer triflorum*.

Left: Cornus sanguinea Midwinter Fire.

Bountiful Berries

A favorite group of plants I've used over the years for exceptional winter interest are the deciduous winterberry hollies. Many cultivars have come and gone, but *Ilex verticillata* Winter Red and Winter Gold remain two of the best. Like all hollies, there are male and female plants, and a male plant needs to be in the vicinity to aide in production of good fruit on the female plants.

For both of these selections, Southern Gentleman is one of the best male pollinators. Winter Red reaches 10-ft. tall and about 6- to 8-ft. wide at maturity. The shiny-red fruits start ripening and turning red in late summer. When the leaves drop in the fall, the naked branches are laden with an abundance of fire-engine red-colored fruits that can last from mid-September to mid-March. Occasionally, a flock of robins or catbirds will come through and devour them, but in large part the fruits remain intact all winter long, providing stunning ornamental fruit for the winter landscape. Winter Gold is a little misleading in that the fruits are more of a soft salmon orange than golden in color. However, they're still an amazing addition to the winter landscape.

Maryland Beauty and Red Sprite are also excellent red selections. Ilex Berry Poppins is a more diminutive selection like Red Sprite, reaching only 3- to 4-ft. tall at maturity with an equal spread. Mr. Poppins is a good male pollinator for

Berry Poppins. *Ilex verticillata* Berry Heavy reaches 6- to 8-ft. tall with an abundance of orange-red fruits, and for golden fruits there's Ilex Berry Heavy Gold and Golden Verboom with soft yellow fruits.

All the winterberry hollies (*Ilex verticillata*) also make great cut branches for the holiday season and then can be used for decorating wreaths and swags, as well.

Colorful Stems

For the winter landscape, there are many great shrubby dogwoods with colored stems. I recently did a planting and used *Cornus sericea* Cardinal. This selection of the red osier dogwood can grow up to 6- to 7-ft. tall in a growing season. In the planting, I installed several in a bed mixed with evergreens that can provide a good backdrop to set off the coral stems. Good evergreens to mix with Cardinal would be *Skimmia japonica* or many of the inkberry holly selections; and Ilex glabra, including Shamrock, as well as Gem Box and Strongbox, which are both being promoted as alternatives for the boxwoods suffering from boxwood blight in many parts of the country.

Cornus sericea Cardinal is a multiple-stem shrub. In the summer, the branches are green, but in late fall they start to change and turn a stunning salmon-orange for the winter. The stems can be cut for winter arrangements. In late winter to early spring, the stems can be cut all the way to the ground or cut back partially to rejuvenate the shrub and create an abundance of new stems, which will be the most brightly colored in the subsequent winter.

Other selections that are great for winter interest include Arctic Fire, with deep red to burgundy stems. *Cornus sericea* Arctic Fire Yellow has golden-yellow stems that really brighten the winter landscape. *Cornus sanguinea* Midwinter Fire reaches about 5- to 6-ft. tall and over time, the clumps will grow in size. The stem color is similar to that of Cardinal, but is more a suffusion of orange and salmon. *Cornus sanguinea* Arctic Sun is similar in color to Midwinter Fire. All of the shrubby dogwoods are great in the landscape, but are also great additions to winter containers.

Certain willows can be selected for beautiful winter stems. *Salix alba* Chermesina has a profusion of bright golden-orange stems all winter long. To best display this willow, it should be either cut back to the ground every year or cut back to a stump of 3- to 4-ft. tall. This severe pruning will result in a very shrubby habit and therefore the production of many stems that will result in the best winter interest. Like many willows, Chermesina has great vigor and can grow 6 to 7 ft. during the growing season.

Like the dogwoods, the willows with colored stems are great for cutting branches and can be added to the landscape in mass plantings or to a container for winter interest. Swizzlestick is a corkscrew willow with dramatic twisting stems that add an architectural element to the winter landscape, but also turn a golden orange color like

Chermesina.

By combining plants like maples, winterberry hollies, shrubby dogwoods and willows, the garden can remain colorful and visually interesting long after the growing season has ended. Peeling bark, persistent berries and brightly colored stems bring texture and structure to the winter landscape while offering a reminder that a beautiful garden can provide interest in every season. **GP**

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