

Winter planting

Just because it's winter, it doesn't mean your garden has to look dull and lifeless. Inspiration can come from anywhere, and there are many vibrant plants that flourish in the cold.



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Ideas for a winter garden can come from anywhere. Take Dublin Zoo in a late October, when the last of the leaves are being whipped from the trees. The planting here has a dual purpose: to provide an attractive visitor environment and to serve as a habitat for the animals.

The evergreen planting is impressive, and we've always admired the use of bamboo to create a dense jungle-like feel. As you would expect, the range of planting is broad and may be too exotic for the average garden. But lessons can be learned from the intelligent use of vegetation to create interesting and diverse spaces all year round.

To make a garden visually interesting in the winter, first you need foliage, and evergreens will bring structure to your space. For example, a hedge to screen your boundaries, or a low box hedge to frame the edges of a mixed ornamental border. It means when the flowering perennials of summer die back, the bare ground is screened and neat. And in milder weather, box hedging will also put out fresh lime-green shoots. I'm also a great believer in using generous clumps of ornamental grasses throughout mixed borders; the bronze golden strands of *Molinia* and *Carex* look great, as do wispy dried grasses like *Calamagrostis* and *Stipa*.



Winter is also a time to appreciate some of the details in plants that, at other times of the year, are cloaked in foliage. Favourites of mine include the peeling bark of the Paper Bark Maple (*Acer Griseum*) or cinnamon barked Luma. And of course, our own native birch trees, whose white stems look wonderful against a foil of clipped shrubs.

For a sprinkling of blossom colour, strong performers are the Mahonia family of evergreens. With careful variety selection, a bank of Mahonias can provide yellow blossoms for most of the winter. The grape-like berries of Mahonia Charity look good enough to press wine and have a wonderful perfume. Other flowering shrubs that do well in winter are Skimmia Rubella and the Witch Hazel (Hamamelis).





For plants with vibrant-coloured leaves, Pieris are a particular favourite. Go for the red of 'Mountain Fire' or the cream prawn of 'Forest Flame'. Choisya 'Sundance' is a cheery yellow all year long which gives an orange scent when it flowers, or when you crush the leaves between your fingers. For purple, Pittosporum Tom Thumb is a tidy one for the front of a border and its bigger cousin 'Irene Patterson' brings a delightful lightness to any winter border.



So, when you are planning your winter garden, here are a few things to think about:

Structure: how you can use planting to make spaces, to form edges and to hold the shape of your garden layout.

Texture: winter is a great time to appreciate bark and branch details.

Colour: not just blossoms, but also vivid and striking foliage.

Scent: the humble evergreen Christmas Box can be quite a surprise in January when its scented aroma catches you stepping out the door.

For more winter garden ideas, visit your local garden centre or take a walk around your area to see what kind of plants are doing well for your neighbours.



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