

Winter Interest With Evergreens, Grasses, and Berries

This time of the year can be somewhat, how shall I phrase this, disheartening in the garden. All of the vivid colours of the growing season are gone; the oranges, reds and yellows of autumn have been stripped away by the combination of wind and cold, and we're left with a mostly brown landscape to ponder until the snow arrives.

Thank goodness for evergreens! They're useful and beautiful year-round, but late autumn and winter is when we really should appreciate them. What would the landscape look like without them? The combination of colour, texture and shape offers an unlimited number of choices that can make a winter garden something special. Plus, evergreens offer both food and shelter to birds in winter. Their presence in your garden gives winter birds another reason to linger so you can enjoy them.

A well-designed garden should have a ratio of one evergreen tree or shrub for every five plants. This should be enough to provide some winter interest after the leaves have fallen from the deciduous plants.

One aspect of conifers that most gardeners don't realize is that, as an added bonus, many conifers change colour as the temperatures get colder. Imagine, not only do you have year-round colour from these plants, several of them actually take on a different colour once fall and winter arrive!

We don't have the same choices when it comes to broadleaf evergreens that are available in warmer climates, but nonetheless we have some good candidates. The various types of wintercreeper, *Euonymus fortunei*, are hardy and colourful, with the green and gold variegated "Emerald n' Gold" and the green and white "Emerald Gaiety" leading the way. "Canadale Gold" and "Moonshadow" have slightly larger green and yellow foliage. Variegated Yuccas like "Colour Guard" and "Golden Sword" have a strong structure as well as showy gold and green colour year round.

Ornamental grasses are wonderful for the winter garden for their texture and movement, but there are also some grasses with evergreen foliage to give colour during winter. *Helictotrichon sempervirens* "Blue Oat Grass" and *Festuca glauca* "Blue Fescue" both have intense steel-blue blades of foliage which last throughout the cold months. *Carex morrowii* "Ice Dance" is a good grass for a shady area, with creamy white variegation on the leaf margins.

Stems of deciduous shrubs can also be a standout during winter after their leaves have been shed. There are many shrub dogwoods (*Cornus*) with outstanding stem colour. "Cardinal" is one of my favourites, with salmon red being the dominant shade. "Arctic Fire" is another relatively new cultivar with beautiful red stems. "Red Gnome" and "Little Rebel" are great colourful choices for smaller spaces.

Don't forget the berries that linger on stems through the winter. Evergreen *Pyracantha* or Firethorn usually produces a heavy crop of orange or yellow berries that are so showy on dull winter days. Another shrub with beautiful berries in fall is the *Callicarpa*, or Beautyberry. The genus name comes from the Greek *kalli*, or beautiful, and *karpos*, fruit. There are few plants in our northern hemisphere with such unique and resplendent fruit and I can't think of another shrub which is transformed more completely in autumn.

The shrub truly is nondescript once the leaves appear in spring, and the blooms, which appear on new growth later in the summer, are not at all prominent. It's only when the flowers have finished and the fruit begins to form that Beautyberry lives up to its common name.

Being observant of which plants are looking good in other gardens this winter will help you to develop ideas to make your garden stand out amongst the grey in future winters. Take note and be ready to make some additions next growing season.