

## The Winter Interest Garden

What does the term “winter interest” mean? In Michigan, most summer annuals cannot be planted until mid to late May and usually get zapped by frost by late October. Perennial blossoms fill our gardens with vibrant colors from April through early November. Winter interest landscaping is important during the time when annuals are not present in the garden and perennials are dormant. **In Michigan, the winter view of a garden can be as long as six months!**

**A balance of winter interest plants, mixed in among annuals and perennials, can keep the garden alive, not only during the season of vibrant bloom, but also during the cold and sometimes bleak months of winter.**

**Shrubs and plants that add beauty to the garden when bloomers are dormant can be divided into several categories.**

**Evergreens:** Evergreens come in all shapes and sizes, as well as fine, medium and coarse textures. Consider the fine texture of boxwood as compared to the coarse texture of plants in the pine or holly families. Evergreens also come in a variety of colors, from chartreuse to deep greens as well as shades of blues.

**Grasses and perennials:** Grasses are among the most popular plants used for winter interest. Their tall blades and plumes add motion to the winter garden. Perennials such as sedums and coneflowers have beautiful seed heads that dry to lovely ivory tones and wear snow and frost-like little winter hats.

**Shrubs and trees with interesting bark or branching systems:** Red and yellow twig dogwoods add beautiful pops of color to the otherwise white and grey of a Michigan winter. Kousa dogwoods, exfoliating river birches and weeping ornamental trees also add interest in the winter garden with their beautiful bark and branching structure.

**Shrubs and trees with berries and other features:** Ilex verticillata (winterberry), viburnums and dogwoods sport colorful berries that light up the garden and provide food for hungry birds. The beautiful dried blossoms of hydrangeas last throughout the winter months right into spring.

**Late winter and early spring thrillers:** Plants that appear very early in the spring can provide relief from the winter doldrums. Helleborus, early spring bulbs such as snowdrops, and witch hazels begin their life cycles while most of the garden is still sleeping.

**Hardscape:** Hardscape items add excitement to the garden during the wintertime as well. Benches, birdbaths and bird feeders, decorative fencing, and trellises and obelisks can give the garden a much needed architectural boost.

Mixing and matching textures, shapes and winter colors, can make the garden just as beautiful in the winter as it is during the height of the summer bloom season. And with Michigan winters lasting up to six months, it is even more important to embrace a winter garden design.



Alaine Bush, Advanced Master Gardener

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**A snowcovered evergreen stands guard against the cold, bleak winter.**



**Bright red stems of redbtwig dogwood stand out against the greys of winter.**



**Plants with berries not only add pops of color to the landscape, but provide a food source for hungry birds.**



**Shrubs and perennials with dried seed heads wear snow like little hats.**



**Helleborus are semi-evergreen and bloom very early in the spring.**



**Hardscape items can add winter interest in the garden.**

**Alaine Bush – Advanced Master Gardener**