

The Winter Garden

by Honey Sharp

"I awoke today and found the frost perched on the town
It hovered in a frozen sky, then it gobbled summer down
When the sun turns traitor cold
and all the trees are shivering in a naked row
I get the urge for going but I never seem to go.

"Now the warriors of winter they gave a cold triumphant shout
And all that stays is dying, all that lives is getting out
See the geese in chevron flight flapping and a-racing on before the snow
They've got the urge for going, and they've got the wings to go."

Joni Mitchell, "Urge for Going"

As most garden enthusiasts know, putting the beds to sleep does not mean that the garden is "over". Nor does it compare to witnessing the velvet curtain fall after a play's last act. With shorter days, frost - and perhaps snow - we may think a curtain has fallen. However, for some it falls more slowly while for others, the play simply continues with its own set of actors. Some actors such as winterberries change costumes; others, like conifers, remain pretty much the same.

No longer distracted by an elaborate stage set overflowing with glossy or variegated leaves, bright and fragrant flowers and roaming butterflies, we, as the audience, witness the next act. We are invited to appreciate the architecture, silhouettes, textures and, yes, even colors of our gardens and the surrounding landscape.

While the experience grows more quiet and subdued, we may often discover that the pleasure is greater come November. After all, much of the backbreaking work is behind us: the door to the tool shed remains closed, the soil has been worked and re-worked; the plants divided and watered; the crocus bulbs ordered, and the tender dahlia tubers stored away. New bonuses also appear upon the horizon. While raking leaves we begin to notice views previously concealed. The hills are now visible and the sky even looks bigger.

This is the time to contemplate our more bare, "peeled away" landscape. Certain textures come into their own. We can pause and touch the velvety emerald moss on an steel-gray boulder or the dry, papery, now amber-colored ferns. And, although it's not hard to disagree with Joni Mitchell's poetic images of shivering trees and geese in chevron flight, winter concedes that nature plays a role all its own. Intrinsic - at times more austere and angular; at others, more subtle - qualities come into focus.

Winter, traditionally associated with hardscapes, reveals the bare bones of a garden: the stone paths, arbors, undulating or straight contours of the garden beds and the general lay of the land. Now that the honeysuckle vine or the rose bushes have loosened their grip, we can notice our split rail fence. (We may also see the need for repairs...) The granite birdbath, uncrowded by Japanese anemones, stands more proudly while a meandering stone wall offers a sense of enclosure.

When it comes to woody plants, the palette changes radically, becoming more earthy. Barks of trees take on an almost radiant when moistened by a morning mist. extend from the grays and beiges of ashes and maples to the brilliant whites of paper birches or the bronzes of river birches.

This time of year is also about texture. Exfoliating barks now form the visually exciting elements of the landscape. Look in the forest for native shagbark hickories with their heavy-duty,

thick curling bark, black tupelos for their deep, vertical ridges or ironwood trees also known as muscle trees. More rare but growing popular in gardens, is the more delicate and elegant *Acer griseum*, appropriately called paperbark maple with its peeling metallic, copper layers. According to tree expert, Michael Dirr, "as an element in a winter landscape,... it has few peers." (Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs). Finally, for visual delight lasting through spring, the Chinese *Prunus maackii* or chokecherry, is another knock-out. As Dirr puts it: "The glossy, amber to reddish brown to cinnamon- brown bark provides spectacular color in winter." Come spring, delicate white flowers burst upon the scene.

Just as actors go backstage for new costumes so do berry producing shrubs. For enduring winter interest, cotoneasters, baneberries, ink berries, viburnums, chokeberries, and of course, winterberries are the candidates. Endowed with lush, glossy fruits, they glow when set against a carpet of white snow. And although we - as well as birds - begin relishing them in early October they assume symbolic qualities, as the season proceeds.

Thus, *Ilex verticillata* or winterberry, endowed with blood-red berries is a harbinger of the holiday season. Some of the Ilex or hollies maintain deep green, glossy leaves throughout winter. Although not all are hardy to this area, they have been associated with December for centuries. Finally, "Deciduous hollies are stars in the winter garden," according to Andrew Bunting in his book, The Winter Garden. (One important caveat however for winterberries, in particular: if you want berries, always plant a male with the females.)

For a more wild garden look, there is *Aronia melanocarpa* or chokeberry with its dangling black fruit. Although not as attractive to birds (hence the name), it, like a gray dogwood with its cream colored berries, has a more subtle, less "in your face" quality.

Finally, let's not overlook low-spreading cotoneasters with berries that range from orange to red. Although overused - after all they do well everywhere! - planted en masse along a bank, they offer year-around interest. They also prevent soil erosion.

Among my favorite deciduous plants that come into their own when their leaves have fallen, are red-osier dogwoods with their glowing, brilliant stems that cover a wide spectrum from red to orange or yellow and lime green depending on the variety, they are a must for visual enhancement on gray days. In fact, the grayer the day, the better. From the native red-osier dogwood to the lime green, 'Flaviramea' or 'Viridissima', with its tinge of yellow to 'Winter Beauty' with its flamboyant mango-orange stems it's not so hard to imagine I've already joined the geese and headed south.

Many plants hold more than winter interest however. A tree need not have a fancy bark to be valued. Its very own trunk and limbs present a unique silhouette against a clear, winter sky. Perennials such as the sedum, 'Autumn Joy', also contribute to a garden just like ornamental grasses. From Miscanthus to the native Panicums and Andropogons or broom-sedges, their wispy stems and straw colored inflorescence add a soft touch to the harsher landscape. No, not all is "dying ... or all that lives is getting out."