

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



December 31, 2022

Discover the Beauty of Plants in the Winter

New Years' resolutions are hard to keep but pledging to enjoy the winter landscape would be easy to keep. It's as easy as looking outside the window of the house or vehicle while going places. Notice red or yellow fruits hanging in the plants and dried seed heads which provide food for the birds. Watch for exfoliating bark and the artistic branching patterns of trees and shrubs or be surprised by tiny flowers on others. Observe unusual herbaceous perennials providing form and structure to the garden as well.

A shrub to small tree with red berries is the common winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*. This is a deciduous holly covered with bright red fruits that persist into winter until the birds devour them. The slow to medium growing shrub can reach 6 to 8 feet in height and width. It prefers a well-drained soil but will grow where the soil is moist. Male flowers and female flowers are produced on different plants. In order to have berries, you will need one male plant among several female plants. Numerous good cultivars are available, selected for fruit size, fruit color, or fall leaf color. For example, Red Sprite is a cultivar that grows 3 to 5 feet tall with large berries. It requires 'Jim Dandy' as the pollinator.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

Foerster's feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster') has quarter to one-half inch wide leaves that form a clump reaching 2 to 3 feet tall. Flower spikes emerge in late May to June reaching about 3 to 4 feet above the foliage. The flowers are greenish with red-bronze tones when they emerge, and dry a golden color. Foerster's reed grass prefers a moist, rich soil but tolerates heavy soils. It tolerates heat if plenty of moisture is available. A location with full sun is best. Movement and sound is added to the garden with the wind blowing through its flower heads in the fall and winter. In the spring, before new growth forms, cut it back to 2 to 4 inches tall.

A common plant with beautiful peeling bark on the trunk is the Heritage® birch (*Betula nigra* Heritage®). The bark color is described as salmon-brown. The small, young branches have a relaxed to weeping feel. The leaves during the growing season are dark green and turn yellow in the fall. The tree can reach 40 to 50 feet tall and spread 40 to 50 feet wide. It starts as an open tree which is often taller than wide in youth. A single trunk specimen is available, but a multi-trunk specimen is common. The plant prefers to grow in moist soil but will tolerate compacted soil and drought.

A tree with the main feature of beautiful, exfoliating, brown and orange bark is the paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*). The plant grows slowly and reaches 20 to 30 feet tall with a spread of 15 to 25 feet. The shape of the tree is oval to round with an upright branching pattern. During the growing season, the leaves consist of 3 leaflets compared to the single and simple leaf of some other common maples. In the fall, the leaves turn a russet red color. It requires soil that is well drained, and it grows in full sun. This tree may be difficult to find. Check locally, first, and then turn to mail order or the internet if necessary.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

Arnold Promise witchhazel, *Hamamelis X intermedia* 'Arnold Promise', blooms in February, and reaches 15 to 20 feet tall. The branches of this shrub may spread over 15 feet long. This cultivar is one of the best yellow flowering witchhazels. The small yellow flowers have thin, narrow petals that twist. When you see this plant blooming in February, it seems hard to believe your eyes. The fall leaf color is reddish-purple.

Cornelian cherry dogwood (*Cornus mas*) is a broad tree that reaches 15 to 25 feet tall with a spread of 15 to 20 feet. In March, small .75 inch, yellow flowers cover the tree. Bright red fruits are produced in summer. The grayish-brown bark exfoliates on older branches. It prefers to grow in well-drained soil and can grow in partial shade to full sun.

A plant that my mother and I enjoy in winter is the herbaceous perennial Italian arum (*Arum italicum*). The foliage appears in late fall and persists through winter in our area. It is unique to see the green arrow-shaped leaves in the garden at this time of year. In the spring, a jack-in-the-pulpit like flower emerges. The foliage dies down as the plant sets red seeds on the stalk in the summer. In the fall, the leaves emerge again and the cycle repeats itself. Italian arum prefers to grow in moist, well-drained soil in shade to partial shade. The plant is 12 to 20 inches tall including the seed stalk.

For more information about winter interest in the landscape, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office at 270-929-3108 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

As you enjoy the branches of trees, notice the shape of the plant too. Maples and ashes usually have a broad, rounded crown. Oaks may have an oval, upright canopy with many strong,

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

bold branches. Snow outlining the branches accents the shape and texture of the plant. For more information about native trees in Kentucky, visit <https://www.uky.edu/hort/Kentucky-trees> or contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office. No matter the tree, enjoy its architecture and interesting characteristics to discover something new in the landscape to chase the winter blues away.

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