

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



December 2, 2023

Adding Winter Interest to the Landscape Through Plants

Plants in the landscape provide visual interest throughout the year. Fall and winter reveal unique branching habits and exfoliating bark of trees and shrubs. Stunning red or yellow fruits catch our eye as well as seeds heads from flowers left for the birds. Even a glimpse of green in the fallen leaves is worth investigating. Plants to enjoy in the winter landscape are described below.

The Heritage® birch (*Betula nigra* Heritage®) shows off its beautiful peeling bark on its trunk and branches, especially in the winter. 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 plant 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. Both single and multi-trunk specimens are available. The plant prefers to grow in moist soil but will tolerate compacted soil and drought.

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Another 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.

A shrub to small tree with red berries is the common winterberry, (*Ilex verticillate*). This plant 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 and female flowers are produced on different plants. To have berries, you will need one male plant among several female plants. Numerous good cultivars of winterberry 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.

Oak leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) is a large shrub with beautiful exfoliating bark which reveals a brown inner bark. The long and large flower panical, which emerges in late May to June ranges from 4 to 12 inches long and 3 to 4 inches wide depending on the cultivar. In the fall, the 3- to 8-inch-long oak shaped leaves turn shades of red to orange. Compact forms

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reaching 3 to 5 feet in height and width or smaller include 'Ruby Slippers', 'Sikes Dwarf' and 'Pee Wee'.

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

With blowing wind, movement and sound is added to the garden by using a grass such as Foerster's feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'). It has a 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 and reach about 3 to 4 feet above the foliage. The flowers are greenish with red-bronze tones when they emerge, and they 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 for this grass. In the spring, before new growth forms, cut it back to 2 to 4 inches tall.

While walking past my flower border recently, the green leaves of the herbaceous perennial Italian arum (*Arum italicum*) caught my eye. 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 summer. In the fall, the leaves emerge again

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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 adding winter interest in the landscape with plants, 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 during a walk, drive, or looking out the window, notice the shape of plants. Maples and ashes usually have a broad, rounded crown. Oaks may have an oval, upright canopy with many strong, bold branches. Snow outlining the branches accents the shape and texture of the plant. More information about native trees in Kentucky is available at <https://www.uky.edu/hort/Kentucky-trees> or contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office.

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