

Winter Flowering Shrubs

Winter-flowering shrubs should be used far more often in our Puget Sound gardens. The combination of a temperate maritime climate and soils that are predominantly acid seems to be just right for many of these plants. The only thing not ideal for some of them is our lack of summer rain, which can easily be taken care of with a few waterings each summer.

The dreary, overcast winter weather can be brightened with a spot of color strategically placed in the garden. In addition, there is often the added bonus of fragrance. Some of the most pleasantly scented plants bloom during this off season, giving an added dimension to the winter garden. Such plants are particularly effective when used in garden areas that are close to walkways and entryways to the house. The fragrance emitted by the flowers of some of these winter blossoms is enchanting.

Check our local nurseries for the following shrubs. Obviously, the best time to shop for them is during the winter when they are in flower.

Viburnum x bodnantense is a medium-to-large deciduous shrub. After it drops its leaves in fall, it produces clusters of small, pink, very fragrant flowers, often throughout the entire winter. These are excellent for cutting and forcing in the house. Note: A very few *bodnantense* shrubs are susceptible to *Phytophthora* disease, but many gardeners have had no problems with the plant.

Viburnum tinus is an evergreen member of this genus that comes in many varieties, ranging in size from small tree to low-growing shrub. Clusters of pink buds open into white, lightly fragrant flowers from November through the winter. In addition to being evergreen, this shrub has the virtue of being drought tolerant once it's established.

Jasminum nudiflorum is a slow-growing deciduous plant that covers itself with yellow trumpet-shaped flowers during the winter. This is a

perfect plant to use at the top of a bank or wall, down which it can cascade. Unfortunately, the species has no fragrance.

Mahonia x media 'Charity' is an exotic-looking relative of our native Oregon grape. This can become a very large shrub (15 feet tall) and should be used with this in mind. It reminds one of a giant prehistoric fern because of the way its immense leaves are arranged. Dense terminal clusters of yellow flowers are produced in December. These develop into waxy black berries.

Sarcococca is a genus containing a number of attractive, glossy-foliaged species that thrive in shade. They all produce small white flowers that are exceedingly fragrant. Plant near a doorway, preferably on the north or east side of the house. The fragrance of the winter flowers can be overpowering, and one branch cut for indoor use will easily fill a room with its scent.

Chimonanthus praecox is a deciduous shrub that produces waxy, pale yellow, spicy scented flowers in February and March before its new leaves appear. This is another plant that should be located somewhere in the winter garden where its intense fragrance can be appreciated.

Daphne odora is a superb low-growing evergreen looking somewhat like a rhododendron. However, its small, rosy-purple flowers produced in February and March tell you it's a daphne. This is the so-called winter daphne, and it's reputed to have the most fragrant flower in the genus.

Daphne mezereum is another winter-blooming daphne, however it's deciduous. Flowers are produced in February before the leaves appear. They are pink or light purple and strongly scented. The bright red berries are poisonous to people, although birds are immune and eat them. Handling the fresh twigs can cause a rash in sensitive individuals. In spite of this, *Daphne mezereum* is commonly grown for its attractive flowers.

Hamamelis mollis is a large deciduous shrub which can easily become a small tree. Like most members of the genus, it produces an abundance of rich golden flowers in December and January. They have an exquisite, spicy fragrance.

Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis' Although its name means autumn-flowering, the shrub begins to bloom in fall and continues to bloom throughout the winter whenever the weather is mild. It has double, white-to-pink flowers. This cherry, like most of its relatives, is actually a small-to-medium-size tree, not a shrub.

The *Ericas*, or heaths, are generally low-growing shrubs with vine, narrow, needles-like leaves. They produce white, rose, red, or purple bell-shaped flowers. Many varieties of *Erica carnea* bloom throughout the winter. They do best in full sun.

Other woody plants that flower during the winter are *Camellia sasanqua*, *Garrya elliptica* (coast silktassel), *Chaenomeles speciosa* (flowering quince), some skimmias, *Magnolia stellata* (star mangolia), *Cornus mas* (the cornelian cherry) and even a few rhododendrons. All the above can be depended upon to produce flowers at some point to relieve the dark and dreary days of winter.

Also, don't forget the herbaceous plants that flower during winter. *Bergenia*, *Helleborus*, some cyclamens, winter aconite, *Iris unguicularis* (winter iris; may be hard to find), *Primula polyantha*, and winter pansies will all perform well in winter gardens in our area.