

High Desert Winter Gardening

By Margo Murdock

Why am I gardening in the winter you ask? Well I'm not out there working in the garden, but I am enjoying my garden. If your garden looks dead in the winter, you need to liven it up. There are lots of ways to add winter interest to your garden such as berms and swales, stones and boulders, evergreens, ornamental grasses, seed heads, berries and acorns, bark, branch color, and plant form.

Berms and Swales. Assuming you do the labor this is the cheapest thing you can do to change a flat landscape into one that's more interesting. Follow the natural drainage, create a swale, and lead the water flow to where you want it to go. In my yard a usually dry stream takes water from the back yard, around the house, and out the front wall. I have plants that need more water located just before the wall where water sometimes ponds. When it rains I have the use of free water and both the stream and the plants slow the run-off thereby reducing soil erosion.

Stones and Boulders. Adding rocks and boulders to your garden is one of the quickest ways to add interest. You can add Sandia granite and limestone rocks which will add a natural touch to the garden. Or you can purchase moss rock (sometimes called field rock) with interesting lichens and reddish color. Group rocks by odd numbers and bury at least a third of each rock for the most natural setting. Rocks should look like they rolled down the mountain and landed in your yard so don't make them vertical unless the grain of the rock is vertical.

Evergreens. You're thinking you have lots of pinõn pines, but you need to broaden your definition of evergreen or evergray. Consider plants like emory or gray oak, shrubs like rosemary, lavender, curl leaf mahogany, fernbush, apache plume, brooms, red yucca (actually an aloe), ephedra or Mormon tea, barberries, mahonias, and perennials like creeping germander or soapwort. Sedums such as Autumn Joy or dragon's blood also add color during the winter and cactus like prickly-pear turn reddish-pink or you can add the vertical green stalks of bear grass. Evergray plants include santolinas, some lavenders, and artemesias or sages. So now you have more interesting choices than a landscape filled with conifers.

Ornamental Grasses. Nothing says winter to me more than interesting shades of grass blowing in the wind or with leaning over under a burden of snow. Mexican feather grass turns light blonde, blue grama and side oats grama turn beige, little bluestem turns rust, Indian grass turns golden, Karl Foerster has great spikes of beige, and Lindheimer's muhly turns silver. Not only do ornamental grasses add interest but they can be used to hide ugly landscape features like utility boxes. They're even soft to work around.

Seed Heads. Seed heads are fun to look at – different shapes, different colors. Why dead head the interesting dead blooms when you can look at them all winter? Great seed heads include chocolate panicles of fernbush, cones of sumac, and flat heads of James buckwheat, eraser-like heads of purple prairie clover, spiky little

angels on the yuccas, flat heads of yarrow, poker-like sticks of liatris (gayfeather) and golden rod, fuzzy white spikes of winterfat, flowery looking blue mist spirea, and Chinese lantern-like cascading oregano.

Berries and Acorns. Berries provide color – reds, blues, yellows, blacks and shape. Hawthorne, and Mexican elder trees, nandina, cotoneasters, wolfberry, mahonias, and barberry shrubs all have wonderfully colored berries and sometimes leaves. Acorns can be found on many oaks such as gray, emory, and Gambel. Both berries and acorns provide food for wildlife during the winter.

Bark. Different colored bark or exfoliating (shedding) bark make trees stand out in an otherwise bare landscape. Examples include: exfoliating gray-brown crepe myrtle, exfoliating cinnamon Chinese lacebark elm, and two more difficult trees for this altitude, aspen (white bark) and river birch (exfoliating).

Branch Color. One of my favorite shrubs for winter is the red twig dogwood. I love the color of the red stems against my tan stucco wall. Winter is actually the most interesting time for this shrub even though it has great green leaves and white flowers in the spring. It is a high water user so I planted it on the northeast side of my house where it gets lots of shade. So think about different colored stems/branches for your garden. There's a yellow twig dogwood if you don't want red.

Plant Form. Deciduous trees that look interesting when the leaves are gone fit into this category. One of my favorite is the New Mexico Olive. The female tree has everything – blue berries, yellow color in the fall (with small leaves for minor cleanup), interesting bark, and a multi-trunked form. Desert willow also has a multi-trunked form and interesting seed heads. Red bud also has an interesting winter look.

So if your garden is dull and lifeless in the winter, add some of these items for a more interesting winter in 2007.

Don't forget to turn your irrigation off for the winter. You'll still need to water at least once a month on a warm day - when the valves and the ground aren't frozen. If it really begins to warm up early, you may need to water twice a month. Trees especially need to be watered in the winter and Mediterranean origin plants like rosemary, sage, lavender, germander, and curry plant expect winter rain – you'll have to provide water to them if we don't get any natural rainfall.