

## A Winter Garden

### John Verity

It always comes as a surprise when a fellow gardener remarks "Oh, I put my garden to bed in November". To me this is a missed opportunity as with some thought and planning one can have a rewarding winter garden despite the reduced range of flowering plants.

Once the leaves have fallen from most of the trees and shrubs and the perennials have died down, one is aware of the framework with which one has to work. It is then that you realise the importance of structure and form. Canon Ellacome in his delightful book 'In a Gloucestershire Garden' makes the point that to grow shrubs well you need a hard heart and a sharp knife.

Another important consideration is the placing of plants in relation to where the sunlight falls during the winter months. The coloured stems of *Cornus alba* and *C. stolonifera* are far more effective if planted so they catch the sun. Conversely, if Camellias are planted where they are exposed to the morning sun there is a risk of losing the buds on a frosty morning. Planting a yellow form of *Hamamelis* against a dark background produces a stunning result; but doing the same with the redder form, *H.*'Jelena', is very disappointing as the sun tends to bleach the colour - so much more effective in transmitted light.

Provided there is sufficient room I would choose the following trees:

*Prunus subhirtella* 'Autumnalis', both white and pink form for their delicate flowers born for much longer than their more flamboyant cousins.

*Prunus mume* 'Beni-chidori', for its dark madder red flowers clinging to bare branches and for bark colour.

*Prunus serrula tibetica*, shiny deep mahogany red bark.

*Betula utilis jacquemontii* 'Snow Queen' (now 'Doorenbos'), for multi stemmed white bark.

Amongst the shrubs, I would choose the following for wonderful scent which is one of the pleasures of a winter garden:

*Hamamelis*

*Chimonanthus praecox* 'Luteus'

*Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata'

*D. laureola*

*Skimmia laureola*

*Sarcococca*

*Lonicera x purpusii*

For leaf colour and form, the following are useful:

*Ligustrum japonicum* 'Rotundifolium'

*Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb'

Variegation is a divisive subject amongst gardeners but fortunately my wife and I agree that judicious use of variegated plants enhances a winter garden. *Azara microphylla* 'Variegata', *Rhamnus alaternus* 'Argenteovariegata' and *Thuja plicata* 'Zebrina' are very effective. *Aucuba*, the type with large golden flashes (but not the spotty *A.* 'Golden King' despite its AGM), also *Elaeagnus pungens* 'Maculata' notwithstanding its tendency to revert, and *Osmanthus heterophyllus* all add brightness and contrast.

Climbers for interest could include a combination of *Jasmine nudiflorum* and *Trachelospermum jasminoides* 'Major' whose leaves in winter turn from green to a shiny dark bronze and will also flower well in summer.

In conclusion I think that one of the great pleasures in a winter garden is to come upon a small group of plants unexpectedly flowering where they have decided to grow, with no human intervention!