

My Best Winter Evergreen Shrubs

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Having a tiny garden at home concentrates my choice of what to grow. Everything has to earn the space it occupies over and over again. In winter I really appreciate the evergreens – which give gravitas and structure in what could be a bleak garden. But evergreenness is not enough. I want flower, berry, perfume, sparkle, movement and anything else offered. With these exacting requirements I choose to grow the following:-

Skimmia 'Kew Green' No other skimmia is anything like as good. Its foliage is dark green (most others are often yellowish), it bears flower-like flower buds from August until April (eight months) before the pale green flowers open in April, then the flowers are highly scented. It's also compact enough that pruning is only needed after a decade or so.

Sarcococca confusa I dislike all other kinds. They juxtapose pink flushing with yellowish green, get too big too quickly, and some sucker and become a problem. *Sarcococca confusa* has a good rounded shape, shiny dark green foliage that sparkles in the weak winter light, grows in appallingly poor sites such as in dry shade, but, best of all, has fabulously strongly perfumed flowers in January together with shiny black berries that set twelve months previously.

Mahonia 'Charity' Other kinds don't have its vigour or fabulous flowers. When it gets too big I cut it to the ground and it refurbishes. The foliage is indubitably architectural, it flowers in November and December and I make the darkest red wine with the berries.

Daphne odora 'Aureomarginata' Good foliage with a narrow cream edge and bunches of scented pink flowers in winter. I've failed to grow other daphnes as successfully and they are mostly more tatty.

Ligustrum japonicum 'Rotundifolium' Thick dark green round shiny foliage is all this offers but it's enough. It's wonderfully heavy. I prune it to keep it below 1m.

Camellia 'Lovelight' Big glossy dark green foliage and fat flower buds open to big double white flowers in early spring which drop off as they brown. The promise of the buds is almost as good as the flowers themselves.

A word of warning. Evergreens are ultimately susceptible to dry cold winds. Don't be surprised by the odd death or diminishment.