



DESIGNING THE WINTER GARDEN

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THE WINTER GARDEN

Start your design with what the garden will look like in winter, when the “bones” are revealed—hardscape, structures, and woody plants.

We can't depend on snow to keep it pretty, so create a plan that looks good in mud season!



OUTSIDE, WHAT'S THE MAIN VIEW?

- In the front yard, it's always the main approach to the front door.
- In a back garden, it might be along a walk, or from your favorite chair.

Start your design there, by creating a great scene for winter.

- Find (or create) a focal point and work around it—a door, a statue, a particularly beautiful tree.
- Choose plants with winter interest to frame the door and house.
- Work with substantial grasses, shrubs, and trees; use multiples of them for best effect.
- If you're going to use small plants like hellebores or bulbs, put them close to a path you travel frequently.



WHAT DO YOU SEE FROM INSIDE?

Inside: Where is the spot from which you most often view your garden out a window? That's the view you should consider.

- For a window view, create a planting that's away from the house—preferably one with contrast!
- Use trees, grasses, and/or shrubs as the main feature. You can't see anything smaller.
- Remember you can't see anything that's directly under the window. So if you want bird feeders or other elements there, you'll need to elevate them.



A COUPLE OTHER DESIGN QUESTIONS

- Do you prefer a tidy garden, or one that's a little jumbled?
- Do you want to see flashes of color in winter, or do you like the hush of snow on evergreens?
- Do you want to attract wildlife?
- Will you need a gathering place like a patio to use in other seasons or solid paths to keep you out of the mud?



THE WINTER GARDEN

The winter garden focuses on form.

Without the distraction of color or softening effect of leaves, we're left with the shape of plants—their form.

We also look at the form of our paths, hardscape, structures, trellises, and other built elements.



FORM

Form is the shape of the elements in the garden. If you squint, you can see the form of large spaces:

- Beds (are they rectangular, circular, or blobby?)
- Lawns
- Garages and sheds (usually rectangular or square)



STRUCTURE

Structure is the underlying bones of the garden, the elements that make it up.

- Hardscaping, like paths and patios.
- Vertical elements like arbors, walls, and fences.
- Woody plants, like trees and shrubs.
- Outbuildings, like sheds and garages.
- And your house! It's the largest element in the garden.



WHY STRUCTURE?

Structural elements in the garden serve a purpose; they **do** something:

- Paths create a safe walk.
- Patios allow a place to gather and sit.
- Fences or trees may frame a vista.
- Fountains or sculpture act as a visual accent
- Trellises give plants a place to climb.
- Carefully positioned plants can screen a view.



STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS HAVE FORM

Think of structure as being an element (a patio, for example) while the form is the shape that element takes (a circle).

Structure = path; form = winding

Structure = brick wall; form = rectangular and solid

Here, the rill is a series of rectangles, and so are the patio, pavers, and wall.



PLANTS HAVE FORMS

Draw the outline of the plant (or just squint!) to see the form of a plant.

- Upright (like the stems of dogwood shrubs or birch tree in this photo)
- Fountain shaped (like the weeping form of willows or forsythia)
- Pyramidal (like spruce and pine trees)
- Rounded (like hollies, inkberries, and boxwood)



USING FOCAL POINTS

A focal point is an element that draws the eye immediately, around which the rest of the garden is shaped.

In the front yard, your front door will be one focal point.

Other good focal points include small, sculptural trees, art, or vignettes (assemblages of a chair and table against a painted wall, for example).

In this picture from Chanticleer, the pool house is a focal point. Even the lines of the pool point to it.



USING CONTRAST

Contrast creates drama. Choose a dominant form, then surround it with contrasting ones.

- Waving grasses surrounding a solid boulder.
- Brilliant yellow-twig dogwood in front of a wall painted dark blue.
- Squarish slab steps surrounded by cloud-pruned shrubs at Chicago Botanic Garden.



USING CONTRAST

Contrast is also an easy way to create a focal point.

- Choose a tree that stands out against its background, like a coral-bark maple framed by a yew hedge.
- Or these blue chairs on a green lawn at Chanticleer. Your eye goes right to them.



USING REPETITION

Repeating forms gives cohesiveness to the garden

- A circular bed repeating the arch over a door.
- A vase-shaped serviceberry echoed by a similarly shaped paperbark maple on the other side of the garden.
- The undulating hedge repeating the curve of the path (also note contrast of airy plants against the solid hedge) at Chanticleer.



USING REPETITION

Use repetition (in form, color, or texture) to tie the garden together.

One easy way to create repetition to choose an accent **color** and use it at least three times. The eye will naturally follow it through the garden.

- A plant color e.g. using yellow-twig dogwood and 'Golden Mop' false cypress in the same garden
- A paint color e.g. using bright red for the front door, a bench, and pot



MY FAVORITE PLANTS FOR THE WINTER GARDEN

Shrubs and grasses are tops on my list.

- Great form.
- Provide habitat for birds and wildlife.
- Provide food in the form of berries or seed.

In addition, a few perennials and bulbs are at their best in winter.



ABOUT EVERGREENS

Needled and scaled evergreens prefer full (but not hot) sun and decent soil. They do not do well in lean soil and hot sites (except *Juniperus* spp.)

Genera that include our native species:

- *Juniperus* (juniper)
- *Pinus* (pine)
- *Thuja* (arborvitae)
- *Tsuga* (hemlock)

Forget the spruces (*Picea* spp.); they've become increasingly prone to needle cast in our changing climate.



ABOUT BROADLEAF EVERGREENS

Broadleaved evergreens—*Ilex* (hollies), *Buxus* (boxwood), *Pyracantha* (firethorn), *Myrica* (bayberry, shown), *Mahonia* (grape holly) – generally prefer an acidic soil but can handle a neutral one.

Cotoneaster is ok in slightly acidic to slightly alkaline soil.

Azaleas must have an acidic soil.

Boxwood is particularly wimpy here; if you're going to grow it, give it good soil and regular water.



CHAMAECYPARIS PISIFERA FALSE CYPRESS

For a brilliant burst of gold in the garden: *Chamaecyparis pisifera* f. *filifera* 'King's Gold' or 'Golden Mop'.

Fine texture, mounding form.

3' x 5'

Full sun to part sun. Average soil. Particularly good when contrasted with dark green evergreens.

Among the other false cypress subspecies, I also like 'Soft Serve' (conical 10' tree that can take some shade) and 'Boulevard'.



JUNIPERUS VIRGINIANA EASTERN RED CEDAR

Native to Indiana. (Not actually a cedar).

Full sun. Average to dry soil. Can handle lean soil and hot sites, unlike nearly all other evergreens.

Avoid planting near apple trees because of cedar apple rust.

Faves: 'Burkii' (10' to 25' x 4' to 10'); 'Canaerti' (20' to 35' x 8' to 15')

I've also had good luck with the non-native *J. scopularum* (e.g. 'Skyrocket').



THUJA OCCIDENTALIS ARBORVITAE

Native to Indiana. Also called eastern white cedar. (Also not actually a cedar).

Full sun to light shade. Must have good soil and regular water.

Fave upright forms: 'Holmstrup,' 'Emerald Green'

Fave smaller form: 'Mr. Bowling Ball' (stays naturally round, 3' x 3'; great in foundation plantings)



TAXUS X MEDIA HYBRID YEW

Much bigger than you think, so don't use them as foundation shrubs! **Slow growing.**

You're more likely to find the (T x media) hybrids here than English yew (*T. baccata*) or Japanese yew (*T. cuspidata*).

Full sun to shade. One of the few evergreens that can handle shade.

They take well to shearing and topiary, but they also look good in their natural form.

Faves: 'Hicksii' (upright and skinny; good for hedges); 'Densiflora' (about 3' to 4' x 4' to 6'); 'Wardii' (short but very wide)



CORNUS SPP. DOGWOOD SHRUBS

Not all dogwood shrubs have brilliant winter color, but these three species and their cultivars do. They all prefer roughly the same conditions.

Cornus alba (Tartarian dogwood) is native to eastern Europe/eastern and northern Asia.

Cornus sanguinea (bloodtwig dogwood) is native to northern Europe/northwestern Asia.

Cornus sericea (red-twig or red osier dogwood) is native to North America (including Indiana).

All look particularly good massed against an evergreen background or solid, dark fence or wall.



Cornus alba by Mike Kirby. Used under CC BY-SA 2.0

CORNUS SERICEA RED-TWIG DOGWOOD

Native to Indiana.

White flowers in spring, white berries in summer, brilliant red or yellow stems in winter.

Full sun to part shade, consistently moist soil.

4' x 4' to Deer resistant

Best color on new stems (so cut down some or all stems in early spring).

Faves: 'Cardinal,' 'Arctic Fire,' 'Budd's Yellow'



CORNUS SANGUINEA BLOODTWIG DOGWOOD

White flowers in spring, white berries in summer. Stems have brilliant winter color: a gradient from red to yellow.

Full sun to part shade, consistently moist soil.

4' x 4' to 10' x 10'. Deer resistant.

Best color on new stems (so cut down some or all stems in early spring).

Faves: 'Arctic Sun,' 'Midwinter Fire'



Cornus sanguinea by Joe Mabel. Used under CCA-SA 4.0

ILEX VERTICILLATA WINTERBERRY

Early flowers, brilliant fruit in winter.

Full sun to part shade; average to very boggy soils. Super for rain gardens.

Plant both male and female for berries

Gorgeous en masse, but works in mixed border too

Deer resistant.

Favorite cultivars: 'Red Sprite' (F), 'Jim Dandy' (M); 'Berry Poppins' (F), 'Mr. Poppins' (M)



LINDERA BENZOIN SPICEBUSH

Butterfly host plant, terrific fall color.

Flowers in late winter (shown). Great for forcing.

Fruit is edible; used as a spice.

Full sun to full shade; depending on location grows 6' x 6' to 12' x 12'.

Deer resistant.



Photo by R.A. Nonenmacher. Used under CC BY-SA 4.0

SYMPHORICARPOS ALBUS SNOWBERRY

Native shrub with green leaves.

Rounded, bushy form.

Bright white berries for wildlife stand out against the stems in winter. Deer resistant.

3' to 6' x 3' to 6'

Full sun to part sun. Average soil, and can handle poor soil.



HAMAMELIS SPP. WITCH HAZEL

Spicy smelling, streamer-like blooms in fall or late winter.

- *Hamamelis virginiana* (common witch hazel, native to IN) blooms in fall.
- *H. vernalis* (Ozark witch hazel) Blooms late winter.
- *Hamamelis x intermedia* (Chinese hybrids), the showiest of the witch hazels. Blooms late winter.

Up to 20' x 20'.

Full sun to part sun. Grow as shrubs or train into small trees.

Faves: Hybrid 'Arnold's Promise', Native *H. virginiana*.

If you have a spot with acidic soil, check out the winter hazels, *Corylopsis sinensis*.



ABOUT GRASSES

Most larger grasses are warm-season; they don't get going until May or June.

If your grass is flopping, don't cut it in half.

Instead, cut the outer ring of growth back by about 1/3 to create a support for the rest of the growth and seedheads.

Sedges (*Carex* spp.) are cool-weather grasses that green up as early as late February.

I use them mostly as groundcover, and they're excellent weed suppression between the larger warm-season grasses.



CALAMAGROSTIS X ACUTIFLORA FEATHER REED GRASS

Tall, narrow grass that holds up well under snow

Moves gracefully in wind

6' x 2'

Full sun; avg to slightly moist soil

Fave: 'Karl Foerster'



PANICUM VIRGATUM: SWITCHGRASS

Upright and substantial with fine seedheads.

Full sun; average soil. Can tolerate flooding and drought.

Deer resistant.

Around 3' x 3' to 6' x 4'.

Faves: 'Cheyenne Sky,' 'Shenandoah,' 'Northwind'



SCHIZACHYRIUM SCOPARIUM LITTLE BLUESTEM

Metallic blue color in summer, various fall shades.

Upright and stiff.

Full sun, average to dry soil.

Deer resistant.

Faves: 'Carousel,' 'The Blues,' 'Standing Ovation'



SPOROBOLUS HETEROLEPIS PRAIRIE DROPSEED

Fine textured, short native grass with tall seedheads summer into fall.

Looks best massed for effect (with backlight if you can manage it!)

2' to 3' x 2' to 3'; 'Tara' is a bit shorter.

Full sun; average to dry soil.

In fall, strong fragrance of toasted grain or coriander. Smell before you plant!



HELLEBORUS SPP. LENTEN OR CHRISTMAS ROSE

Bloom in February, usually. Foliage is evergreen.

- *Helleborus niger* (Christmas rose)
- *Helleborus orientalis* (Lenten rose)
- Hybrids.

Up to 2' x 2'. Deer resistant.

Part shade to shade. Average to dry soil. Just trim off tattered leaves at end of winter; don't cut back entire plant.



HEUCHERA SPP. CORALBELLS

Wide variety of cultivars in several colors; evergreen.

Natives:

- *H. americana* (coral bells, part shade, avg to moist)
- *H. richardsonii* (prairie alumroot, full sun to part shade, avg to moist)
- *H. villosa* (hairy alumroot; full sun to part shade; avg to dry). Hybrids with *H. villosa* parentage are best for heat and humidity.

Up to 24" x 24"

Full (but not hot) sun to part shade. Just trim off tattered leaves at end of winter; don't cut back entire plant.



GALANTHUS ELWESII GREATER SNOWDROP

Bloom January or February; plant in fall.

Height: up to 12"

Best locations:

- shade and part-shade beds
- woodlands
- in meadows

*Avoid *G. nivalis*, which tends toward invasiveness



THANK YOU!

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