

Natives in the Winter Garden

By Linda Iverson

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Plants may go dormant, but the evidence of their hard work during the growing season is what takes us through the long, greenless months. Those of us who love to grow plants finally have time to contemplate them; winter is when we can appreciate the subtleties that remain.

I often am distracted in my office by the gentle swaying of a basin wildrye that lives just outside the window. This giant has survived total annihilation by grasshopper plagues more than once, and still grows every season to mammoth proportions, to the point where I often need to thin it out to keep it from falling over. But no other Montana native grass can boast that kind of size.

The low light of winter illuminates many grasses. Bluebunch wheatgrass has strong stems and maintains its upright stance, the sparse chain-like seed stalks are distinct amid the rich, gold leaves. I love the bunchgrass communities on the hillsides near my house; their spacing is so random. Indian ricegrass grows in these dry places too, but it is the opposite, all lacy and fine. They both absolutely sparkle on frosty mornings.

The spring rains were like a life raft for so many plants. The abundance of growth this summer is testimony to their ability to revive from a long drought. Shattered seed from many of the grasses has sprouted and covered my gravelly hillsides with tiny hair-like seedlings. I'm hoping the late fall rains and early snow will protect them till spring.

Evergreens are looking stronger than they have in years. Douglas-fir, ponderosa, and limber pine provide a strong contrast to the grasses. Though not technically evergreen, silver sage holds its soft, gray color and tawny seedheads

through the winter, and shelters rabbits. I've planted several in my little compound. Rangeland shrubs, such as rabbitbrush and winterfat, do the same. They're like little snow fences out in the prairie, holding the drifts like shadows. And I can't forget the yucca, their olive green, spiky leaf blades poking out through the snow—talk about sharp contrast!

Persistent berries on many of our shrubs: ivory-white snowberries, the orange rosehips of the wood's rose, Rocky Mountain juniper laden with berries, are all pretty to us, but essential food for the tough winter birds. Often shrubs have their best show when the leaves fall. Branches of red twig dogwood and several species of willow tune-up the river bottoms.

But probably the one vision I appreciate in winter the most is the beautiful silhouette of the water birch. Again, the winter light shows off the fine, dainty branches and shiny, cinnamon bark. They grow in large, graceful groves along the creeks. I stubbornly planted a couple near the house, fully knowing they need lots of slow soaks with the garden hose. I also love the silvery-gray bark and persistent catkins of the nearby alder on the creek, but the birch steal the show.

I never cut anything back in my gardens until spring because many of the flowering forbs have such a strong presence in the winter. Dark brown globes of pale-purple coneflower and soft furry balls of blanketflower intermingle. The prairie forbs leave behind many interesting textures and colors. Goldenrod, yarrow, broom snakeweed, annual sunflowers, beebalm, clematis, and smooth aster all have so much to add. Time suspends and preserves them in a dried state for months.

Usually by March we're all weary of winter and ready for the revival of spring, but there's something special about this time of year. And the best respite for a gardener, no weeding!

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