

Way to Grow

Winter Wonders

by Steve & Cathy Lambert



After flowers fade and leaves fall other subtle plant characteristics that go unnoticed spring through fall, begin to grace our gardens with winter wonder. There are plenty of plants that can add visually stimulating drama or peaceful beauty to your winter landscape with colorful peeling bark, twisting branches, and textural seed heads. To follow are a few of our favorite ways to ramp up some winter interest in your yard.

Planting trees and shrubs with colorful bark or stems can provide a welcome contrast to bare gardens and dreary, gray skies. Certain trees can also add textural interest with their exfoliating bark. Exfoliating bark refers to a shedding or peeling quality found on certain varieties.

Even the most casual garden observer can't help but notice the pure white branches and trunk of a bare Indian white birch as it captures the late season sun or is silhouetted against a crisp, blue winter sky. Our top pick for birch is the *Betula utilis* 'Jacquemontii' (white bark Himalayan birch) which is native to India at the same latitude and longitude as the Bay Area making them particularly well suited to our Orinda climate. The typical European white birch, which is commonly found at many local nurseries, does not adapt nearly as well to our environment.

Two other favorites for their peeling bark appeal and color are *Acer griseum* (Paperbark Maple) and *Physocarpus* 'Diablo' (Purple Leaf Ninebark) also known as Diablo ninebark. Paperbark maples are a small to medium height, slow growing tree with a maximum height of 15-to-20 feet. They have attractive light green, trifoliolate foliage that turns a striking yellow and red in the fall. It's the bark however, that makes this tree truly stand out in winter. Large, paper-thin shavings of deep mahogany bark curl and cling from this tree revealing a light, tan bark beneath. We have a gorgeous, mature specimen in our yard planted where it can be enjoyed from our front door.

Diablo ninebark is a show-stopping shrub

from spring through fall with lush, purple foliage and contrasting white flowers with just a hint of pink blush. Both the leaves and seedpods provide great fall color, picking up darker burnt orange and red tones. As its name suggests, the bark is a major part of this shrub's appeal. If left un-pruned, its bark will exfoliate in the winter, to reveal several layers of color from white to a brilliant red. This shrub grows 7-to-9 feet in height and is slightly narrower in spread.

Another exfoliating tree which has a shiny bark and horizontal strips is the Amur cherry, *Prunus maackii*. This year-round contributor adds a special magic in the winter with its glossy, rich bronze color. It appears almost like a polished metal sculpture.

Patterns created by winter's low light shining through trees and shrubs with twisted branches also help to add some visual interest to your otherwise barren winter yard. For this purpose, we recommend both Henry Lauders' walking stick and *Corylus* 'contorta' with incredible twisting branches that are best appreciated when bare. A beautiful, smaller, arching tree with twisted branches is the Twisty Baby Locust, (*Robinia* 'Twisty Baby') which creates an impressive 8-to-10-foot fountain of flowing vines when properly pruned.

The showiest of wintertime plants are those that offer the most colorful bark to contrast the dull, pale palette of a winter garden. Few plants have brighter winter stems than shrub dogwoods or creek dogwoods. These dogwoods are native to forests from Newfoundland to Alaska as well as south through the Rockies, into California. Available in an array of brilliant colors from red and yellow to bright salmon, creek dogwoods do very well in Orinda when planted under large trees.

In our garden we leave the seed heads of several varieties of Black-eyed Susan, *Salvias*, and Safflowers in the garden long after the petals have fallen off. Black-eyed Susans add interesting texture with their tall cones. A far better reason not to deadhead

these flowers is for the finches and other small birds they'll attract. The fluttering of these small birds feasting on the seeds atop the thinly stemmed cones will make your plants appear to dance beneath them.

Deciduous grasses can also add winter texture and movement. If left un-pruned, they'll fade to tan or gold and glow as they catch the low winter light. All too often these plants are cut back, or even worse hedged, as soon as their color starts to fade robbing your winter garden of their golden color and glimmer on frosty mornings.

Take a good look at your landscape this winter and note where you could use a splash of color or the textural accent of peeling bark. Bark, stems and seed heads, otherwise lost in the flower and foliage of a garden in full bloom can become center stage stars in a sparse winter landscape.

If you have questions about this article, please email us at Office@GardenLights-Landscape.com.



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This paperbark maple adds interest to a winter yard.