

Your garden in winter: aim for structure, fragrance and colour

James Brady
Lecturer, Teagasc College
at the National Botanic
Gardens.



It's a common misconception that flowers are associated only with spring and summer. There are plants available that have adapted to endure harsh winter conditions.

Consider plants like hellebores – they offer an abundance of colour over a long flowering period of six to eight weeks from winter to early spring. *Helleborus 'Anna's Red'* has rich, glossy evergreen foliage, from which bright reddish-purple flowers emerge on tall stalks approximately 15" tall.

Evergreen heathers provide a carpet of colour for any flower or shrub bed in winter. *Erica carnea* tends to be more suitable, as they are more tolerant of limey soils.

Plant in a group and they will create a powerful impact in your garden. Other plants to consider for their flowers include *Cyclamen coum*, snowdrops, crocus and *Cornus mas*.

Structure

Structure can be incorporated into any size garden through the use of evergreens. These plants earn their keep in winter, as they provide vital structure to the garden that most deciduous plants lack.



Mahonia x media 'Charity'.

Many winter evergreens offer additional interest in the form of berries, colourful buds or flowers. Consider plants such as *Mahonia x media 'Charity'* that can flower from late autumn to late winter.

This plant also provides an excellent backdrop to any border, while producing bright, fragrant yellow flowers that are borne at the end of its branches. Ideal for partial shade, it



Helleborus 'Anna's Red'.

grows best in moist but well drained soil.

Consider other plants that provide excellent structure to the garden such as *Ilex* (holly), which provides glossy green foliage while giving additional interest due to their berries. Many forms are available, including variegated varieties.

Viburnum tinus 'Eve Price' is a must for any garden – packed with winter interest, it's sure to make you stop and take note.

It's a medium-sized evergreen shrub with oval, dark green leaves and, from late winter, clusters of deep pink buds opening to small, white flowers. Deep metallic-blue berries provide additional interest.

Fragrance

Incorporate fragrant plants in as many places as possible. Think about their purpose and function within the garden – for example, a low, informal hedge which could be achieved by planting *Lavandula angustifolia 'Hidcote'*. Not only does this plant serve its function as a low hedge, it will provide a strong scent in the garden.

Winter fragrance needs to be powerful and there are an array of plants that do just that. *Sarcococca hookeriana var. humilis*, commonly known as 'Christmas box' is a compact shrub, forming a neat clump of glossy leaves,



Daphne bholua 'Jacqueline Postill'.

with small clusters of very fragrant creamy-white flowers with a dusting of crimson in winter, followed by black berries.

Although this plant will grow happily in the shade, try and plant it near a path or door to enjoy its beautiful sweet scent.

When it comes to a show stopper, there really is only one plant for the job – *Daphne bholua 'Jacqueline Postill'*. A medium-sized semi-evergreen shrub with an upright habit and highly fragrant pink flowers from January to March.

Plant in a sheltered location in well-drained soil. Enhance its beauty by under-planting with a carpet of magenta or white *Cyclamen coum*.

Colour

An important element of winter gardens, colour doesn't only have to come from flowers – think about the stems, leaf and bark. Deciduous shrubs or trees with colourful stems or twigs can focus your attention on even the dullest of corners.

The peeling creamy-white stems of the himalayan birch, *Betula utilis var. 'Jacquemontii'*, can make a striking impact against a dark green backdrop.

My favourite has to be *Cornus sanguinea 'Midwinter Fire'*, providing superb autumn colour and winter interest. The yellow-green leaves turn a vibrant shade of red in autumn before they fall to reveal stunning orange winter stems with vibrant red tips. This colourful display lasts well into spring until the new leaves emerge.



Cornus sanguinea 'Midwinter Fire'.

Pruning is required every two or three years to help rejuvenate the plant and replace old, dull stems which darken with age. In April, cut back the stems to within two or three buds from the base, allowing new colourful shoots to take their place.