

# WINTER ATTRACTIONS

Skeletons, barks, and berries usher out one season and bring in another.

Christopher Lloyd

THE YEAR CANNOT be expected to end in a blaze of glory—that came earlier, if at all—but the winter garden can take us gardeners gently by the hand and lead us through quiet satisfactions.

## Colorful Bark

Bare trees, for instance, are far from being a negation of life. Some of them, as untrammelled outlines, can be even more satisfying than when cluttered with foliage. The weeping version of the **British native ash**, *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Pendula' (USDA Zone 5), develops angularities that we associate with Far Eastern art. It is a tree that has to be grafted onto stock of the type-plant and the higher the graft is made, the more spectacular the

resulting cascade of branches. The **London plane**, *Platanus ×hispanica* (Zone 5), also develops fantastic angularities, and once the leaves are off, you can best appreciate the patterns made by its peeling bark.

Of small deciduous trees, one of my favorites is a **Japanese maple**, best known as *Acer palmatum* 'Senkaki' (Zone 7), but now declared to be 'Sango-kaku'. Both its spring and its autumn foliage are charming, the latter bright yellow, but after leaf fall the young twigs show up pinky carmine. Of shrubs for an amazing sequence year-through that is always catching your eye, I would award the palm to the variegated form of the **native American dogwood** *Cornus alternifolia* 'Argentea' (Zone 3). It has a horizontal arrangement of twiggy branches, which rise in layers, perhaps to 15 feet. In summer, the whole shrub is a confection of tiny green-and-white-variegated leaves. In winter the branches are purplish, and it is after leaf fall that you notice raindrops suspended on their undersides, where they catch the light and reflect it as silver. Fergus (Garrett, the head gardener) is jealous of its lowest branches, which would come right down to the ground if allowed, but we have pruned them up, as I like to underplant the tree with early spring bulbs.



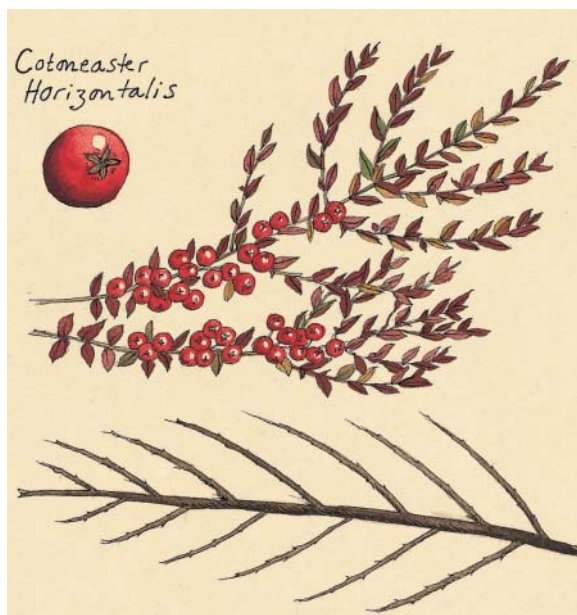
## Bright Berries

Near the dogwood I have the hermaphrodite form of **butcher's broom**, *Ruscus aculeatus* (Zone 7). (Butchers used to sweep their chopping boards with its stiff, evergreen branches.) This comes true from seed, but is a desperately slow-growing shrub, ultimately not

much more than a foot tall but making a colony, and good in deeply shaded areas. Its large crimson-red berries are present for most of the year, but the new crop is pristine from autumn through to spring. The glossy berries catch and reflect winter sunshine in a most cheering way. The shrub itself is dark and solemn, so I have planted next to it an **evergreen fern** that retains its lively green coloring right through the darkest days. This is *Polypodium interjectum* 'Cornubiense' (Zone 5)—only nine inches or so high with rather horizontally spreading fronds. If temporarily squashed by snow, this won't show badly after a thaw.

Among the hardiest of **evergreen shrubs** are the many varieties of *Aucuba japonica* (Zone 7). In my country, these are somewhat despised, but if you choose the right varieties and treat them well, they are most rewarding. Each named cultivar is either male or female. The latter can carry spectacular crops of scarlet fruit. The one I grow is called 'Longifolia'. It has narrow, plain green leaves. The berries do not ripen until February, but to have fresh fruit at that late season is a joy. My male pollinator is hectically yellow-variegated with large spots all over. Fergus and I love it, but to some people this kind of variegation is anathema. It is not much use my quoting the name under which I bought it, years ago, because that name should be attached to a female, which mine is emphatically not. The variegated aucubas are apt to scorch on their young foliage in strong sunlight, but they are excellent in part-shade. The faintly speckled kind that you see around public lavatories in London are hideous. The variegation should be wholehearted. Best to buy by eye, really.

The **native American holly**, *Ilex verticillata* (Zone 3), is a wonderful sight when in full berry but still carrying bright green foliage, as I have seen it in New England in October. I am told that the berries are retained after the leaves have fallen. This species is hardly ever seen in Britain, possibly because it is not native and you



have consciously to plant an unproductive male if his harem of ladies is to be pollinated and to fruit. I have now bought both sexes and shall try them for myself, but it is possible that our summers are too cool to produce a good crop. The **native British holly** is *Ilex aquifolium* (Zone 6), and there are umpteen variants. Pollination is no problem because there are sure to be males around and within bee-flight distance. But it is not 100 percent hardy below Zone 6, preferring more moderate locations such as Long Island, the Pacific Northwest, and Cape Cod.

I don't know how it is with you, but sometimes our hollies retain their berries right into early summer the next year—but this depends on the birds' needs and appetites. Also on whether there are many birds around. In cities, berrying trees and shrubs often retain their fruit for many months. This particularly suits **cotoneaster**, *C. horizontalis* (Zone 5), which is one of my favorite shrubs on many counts, though widely despised among the elite, just because it is so easy and obliging. The branches have a strong, curving fish-

## WINTER BLOOMERS=SUMMER SNOOZERS

**Most of the winter-flowering shrubs (including heathers) are rather dowdy when not in bloom, so I think it's a mistake to grow them all near the house in a special winter gathering. In the summer, if not actually not an eyesore, you'll be aware of the fact that they're not contributing, so**

**I believe in scattering them around and perhaps growing a clematis through any of the larger specimens so as to mitigate their off-season dullness.**

—*The Year at Great Dixter*



bone structure, best seen when bare, but that is not for long, as it is leafing here in February. The leaves are not shed till late November, turning carmine then and contrasting with crimson berries. This shrub will plaster itself against a wall of any aspect and climb without assistance. But it will also bracket forward from the top of a retaining wall (birds often seed it into my walls). Its stiffness allows other climbers to drape themselves over it.

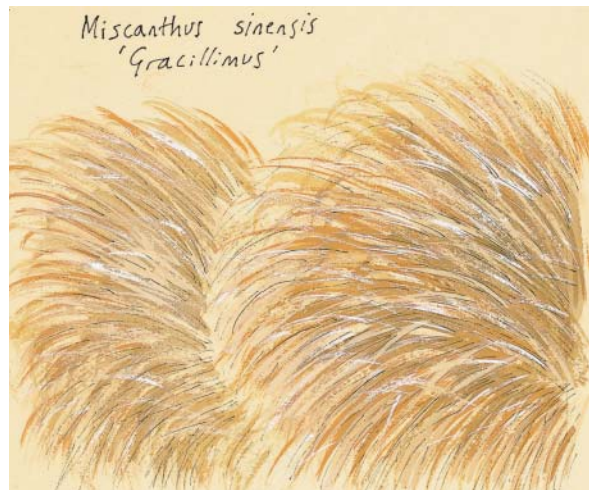
Quite a small and underrated shrub is **spirea**, *Spiraea thunbergii* (Zone 4). Its narrow leaves change to clear yellow in late fall, sometimes not until early December. Early in spring, its wands of flower buds begin to swell—they remind me of miniature Brussels sprouts. The white blossom follows, over an extended period, after which I prune it (or I don't), removing old wood completely. The shrub is never much more than five feet high.

## Skeletons in the Garden

There are many skeletons that please us in winter. The **cardoons**, *Cynara cardunculus* (Zone 6), are among the most handsome. This plant has wonderful gray foliage in spring and early summer, then rises to eight feet with branching candelabra-like giant thistles. The scented lavender flower heads, covered with bees, come in August. Then the seed ripens, and the head becomes a pouf of stamens, surrounded by persistent bracts. They will stand the weight of snow, and we leave them standing until March, when we cut them down.

Unless battered by exceptional winds or heavy snows, many **grasses** remain beautiful until the New Year, especially those of the genus *Miscanthus*. Both the pale flower heads and the gradually coloring, then bleaching foliage contribute, but a big foliage molt generally sets in at the end of the year.

One excellent grass right through from its flowering at midsummer until spring, when we cut it back, is the three-foot-tall *Stipa calamagrostis* (Zone 6). It is fluffy and pale green when flowering, then closes to a kind of “tail” and gradually bleaches to palest fawn. These grasses should be placed where they catch the winter sun. ♡



## MAGNOLIAS IN WINTER

**Magnolias can make beautiful old bones, especially those of twiggly rather than coarse habit (like *M. campbellii*). *Magnolia stellata* is good, and among more recent plantings I am greatly enamored of *M. ×loebneri* 'Leonard Messel'. It has a dense arrangement of twiggly branches, each twig tipped by a furry gray flower bud. Magnolias bud up in autumn and give you plenty of opportunity for**

**gloating anticipation. Pride comes before a fall but then we all know that and allow for it and gloat just the same. My buds on my magnolia, yummy, yummy, yummy. — Christopher Lloyd's Gardening Year**