

Evergreen Plants In Winter Gardens

In the winter, evergreen plants move from the background elements we build the rest of our gardens around, to the primary players that are hugely important. A winter landscape without spots of green would be bleak indeed. The following plants will keep their foliage all winter as they go through their act of changing colors as the temperature gets colder and colder. You get the best of both worlds; fall color and evergreen foliage.

- **PJM Rhodies** – A great rhododendron that won't cover the front room window. Smaller sized leaves turn a rich mahogany in winter and have a very distinct fragrance to them. The purplish-pink flowers come out in early spring and are striking against the dark winter foliage. Hardy to -25 degrees and heat tolerant, PJM grows 4' tall and is very durable. There are several variations to choose from.
- **Nandina (Heavenly Bamboo)** – Don't panic, this is not a true bamboo and won't take over your yard. Nandina will grow in sun or shade and comes in several forms from dwarf that only grows 18" tall to the standard forms that reach 6' tall. Nandina has a pleasingly textured foliage that is reminiscent of bamboo. Terminal clusters of white flowers produce red berries in winter that are perfect for using in holiday wreaths. The foliage, which is a soft light green during the season, takes on a purple, red and bronze tints in the fall and then turns fiery crimson in the winter. Firepower, Gulf Stream and Sienna Sunrise are some of our favorites.
- **Euonymus** – Two varieties come to mind, Emerald Gaiety with green and white foliage and Emerald Gold with green and gold foliage. Both take on fabulous tones of pink and purples in the winter. You can plant them as a ground cover and maintain them at 18 to 24 inches tall. Euonymus grows best in full sun or afternoon shade.
- **Abelia** – Sometimes deciduous but usually evergreen, Abelias have foliage that take on rich winter colors. Kaleidoscope is by far the best with variegated foliage in the summer that becomes all the colors of a kaleidoscope in the winter. Plant them in full sun for the best colors.
- **Leucothoe** – This is a wonderful plant that should be in a lot more yards than it is. Leucothoe is native to the south-eastern U.S. but seems to be at home here in the northwest. It is a great "woodland" looking plant that has glossy foliage with white bell-shaped flowers in spring. Normally sold as a shade plant, it will do just fine in sun if the soil is enriched with compost and adequate moisture is provided. They have even been seen used as a low growing hedge at the

Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle. Stems are arching to 2 to 3 feet tall and 4 to 5 feet wide. The leaves emerge bronze, turn dark green in the summer and then return to a reddish-brown in the winter. Rainbow and Scarletta are the most colorful.

- **Cryptomeria Japonica Elegans (Plume Cedar)** – This is a conifer with needle-like foliage but unlike any pine or spruce you have ever seen. Very soft feathery foliage is a pleasing blueish-green in summer turning a rich coppery red or purple in the winter. This variety can grow into a tree, reaching 40 feet tall. Surprisingly, there are several conifers that take on a plum color in the winter.
- **Bergenia** – Known in England as Pig Squeak because of the sound made when you rub your fingers over the foliage, Bergenia has been around forever. An evergreen perennial that blooms in early spring with stalks of white to pink nodding flowers, the coarse glossy foliage is what makes this plant so useful. Use it as a ground cover or for a broad foliated accent in either the sun or shade. Several varieties are now available that turn a striking bronze in the winter, including Winter Glow and Bressingham Ruby.
- **Euphorbia** – An evergreen perennial known for its architectural qualities in the garden, Euphorbia looks rather tropical or succulent as though it should belong in Southern California, but it is perfectly hardy for the northwest and makes a great addition to the garden. Black Bird, Glacier Blue, Ruby Glow, and Shorty are a few of our favorite flavors. Plant them in full sun and hold back in the water in the summer.

Many perennials will hold much of their foliage through the winter and are evergreen, or semi-evergreen. Some of these plants include lavender, hellebores, many sedum varieties, coral bells (heuchera), yucca plants, some ornamental grasses and more. Evergreen ground covers include ajuga, creeping phlox, thyme and creeping juniper. Vines that are generally evergreen include winter jasmine and some honeysuckles.

Although most conifer trees are considered to be “evergreen”, their needles don’t live forever. What makes them evergreen is that their leaves persist more than one year before falling. Since new needles are added every year, there is always an overlap between green needles and those that are due to fall. Older needles on the inside of evergreen trees are shed each fall after they turn yellow, brown or reddish tan in color. Sometimes this natural process is very subtle and goes unnoticed because only the inner most needles are affected. Pine trees can hold their needles for 2 to 5 years or more, depending on the species. Spruce trees generally hold onto their needles longer than pine trees do, approximately 5 to 7 years. Believe it or not, there are actually a few types of conifers that shed all their needles EVERY year. These deciduous conifers include Larch, Bald Cypress

and Dawn Redwood. The Larch with its golden yellow and the Bald Cypress and Dawn Redwood with their bronze hues can add great beauty to the fall landscape. Such trees are unusual enough that more than one story has been told about people that removed such trees after they were mistakenly determined to be dead. Yikes!

Plan your evergreen designs as carefully as you plant your flower designs. Just as you want to consider what color flowers look good together, plan what foliage looks good together. You will also need to think about proper balance in the garden when selecting your evergreens. Too many different variegated or brightly colored plants all together could make your garden appear busy and overwhelming, rather than exciting and inviting. Use boldly colored plants more as accents and carefully chosen focal points. Use evergreens in the winter landscape to showcase and set off other focal point plants. For instance, planting a small stand of red-stemmed dogwoods in front of a row of cedars will allow the brilliant red stems to really stand out against the deep green of the conifers. Or use a few deep green hollies behind a golden-leaved variety for a bright entrance area that will really stand out.