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# GEORGIA GARDENING

GEORGIA'S OWN GUIDE TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING

## WINTER GARDENING

CREATING INTEREST IN  
GEORGIA'S FOURTH SEASON

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# WINTER GARDENING

Creating interest in Georgia's fourth season

By Helen Newling Lawson

**Winters in Georgia are blessedly short so some gardeners just resign themselves to waiting out those few months until spring arrives.**

But if you take advantage of the vast number of plants that survive – and even thrive – in our mild winters, you'll be rewarded with a true year-round landscape. Without the sweltering heat and endless chores of summer, winter might even become your favorite time to enjoy the garden!

A garden with year-round interest almost never happens by accident – it takes some planning, even if you agree with author David Culp of *The Layered Garden*, that “once you make it, put it in a drawer.”

A well-designed garden is often described as having “good bones.” Plants with year-round interest (most commonly evergreens, but there are other choices, too) create the basic framework of your garden. Hardscaping also helps create a look that can weather all seasons.

Group the plants that will shine in winter as the “backbone” of your garden beds. This doesn't mean they have to be shoved to the back of the border – try a curving line or evenly weighted

groupings. Now feel free to add plants with seasonal interest to “flesh it out.”

Then determine where focal points should be. I like to create mine around an arbor that I can see from my kitchen window. The arbor provides structure and I can enjoy the view as I stir my pot of chili on cold days. But you might prefer to place some fragrant winter bloomers where you can catch the scent as you scurry in from the cold, or create winter containers for some natural holiday decor. Of course, you can have more than one, but it's also in keeping with the season to allow some areas to rest.

The structure of your garden is important, but also consider the structure of the plants themselves. Play the natural shape of various shrubs and trees against each other, like an upright juniper (*Juniperus* spp.) against the horizontal habit of prostrate Japanese plum yew (*Cephalotaxus harringtonia* ‘Prostrata’). The twisted branches of shrubs like ‘Flying Dragon’ hardy orange (*Citrus trifoliata* ‘Flying Dragon’) or the multiple trunks of crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia*) stand on their own as sculptural elements.

We reached out to a few experts for their top picks in each category. Andy Kinsey of

**Leaving seed heads on grasses will allow them to catch and sparkle with dew – or even frost. In the foreground, evergreens and pansies (*Viola x wittrockiana*) are two choices for year-round container gardening.**



Kinsey Family Farms points to 'Red Dragon' contorted filbert (*Corylus avellana* 'Red Dragon') as a blight-resistant selection of the shrub also known as Harry Lauder's walking stick. This cultivar sports reddish purple foliage spring through early summer and extends its seasonal interest turning golden yellow in the fall.

Add movement and life with textured plants, including trees with exfoliating bark. James Hembree, superintendent of landscape at the University of West Georgia recommends 'Cheyenne Sky' switchgrass. He says, "Blades gently moving with the wind under loose inflorescence makes it especially effective in the winter garden against an evergreen backdrop." For contrast, try plants that keep their large, glossy leaves through winter like *Fatsia* and giant leopard plant (*Farfugium japonicum* var. *giganteum*). Kinsey loves City Slicker river birch (*Betula nigra* 'Whit XXV') for its nearly pure white peeling bark, resistance to bronze birch borer, and strong (not "twiggy") branches forming an oval canopy.

The obvious choice for jazzing up a brown landscape is evergreens, but keep in mind not all evergreens have to be conifers, or even green! Many new plants have been introduced that have golden foliage, such as *Ligustrum* 'Sunshine', *Acorus*, *Rhododendron*, *Aucuba*, and

some ferns are other options for greening up the winter landscape. Color can also come from redbtwig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) or coral bark Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku'). Berries from plants like winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) won't just brighten your garden, they're also valuable food sources for wildlife.

David Freed of Garden Designs Nursery recommends 'Bihou' Japanese maple, describing this small specimen tree as the gold counterpoint to the famous 'Sango-kaku'. He recommends uplighting to intensify its glowing yellow bark for a stunning focal point on a winter's evening.

Fragrance is an especially unexpected treat during the winter. Winter daphne (*D. odora*) and *Edgeworthia chrysantha* both have intensely perfumed flowers that earn them raving fans. Dr. Larry Mellichamp, retired director of the UNC at Charlotte Botanical Gardens and co-author of *The Winter Garden*, calls edgeworthia the "best plant overall ... if you can only have one winter plant." Witch hazel (*Hamamelis* spp.) has a lighter, more delicate scent befitting its delicate tassel-like flowers that appear on bare stems at winter's end. The flowers of sweetbox are small, but offer a lovely fragrance, especially when planted en masse. Plant any of these near an entry so they can be enjoyed any time you brave the elements. Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus*

**Facing page: Georgia gardens aren't often enhanced by snow, but when they are, a dusting over hellebores already in bloom is magical. The incredibly long-lasting flowers will persist well into May, giving the common name "Lenten rose."**

**▼ Don't be afraid to brighten a somber scene with a little whimsy. Mirrored globes bring sparkle to a rainy day at the Atlanta Botanical Garden Gainesville.**









**Clockwise from top left:**  
The fragrant, popcorn-like flower clusters and sculptural form of *Edgeworthia* make it a top choice for winter interest.

In return for berries and seed heads, birds add color, life, and movement to an otherwise stark landscape – winter gardens aren't the same without a brilliant red cardinal to brighten them.

Cut back on cutting back. Flower heads allowed to dry in place at Gibbs Gardens carry the beauty of hydrangeas well beyond summer.

Although they have a reputation for being finicky, in the right conditions winter daphne pays off in spades with both blooms and fragrance. This specimen at Piccadilly Farm in Bishop (best known for their hellebores) is clearly happy with its spot.



### Year-Round Benefits

These plants have reasons to love them all year long

**Sweetbox (*Sarcococca* spp.)**  
– This low-maintenance, deer-resistant evergreen shrub handles dry shade admirably. The dwarf variety (*S. hookeriana* var. *humilis*) can be grown as a ground cover.

**Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*)**  
– Flowers mature to edible fruits in summer. Eat them fresh or make into a tart jelly.

**Hellebores (*Helleborus* spp.)**  
– These tough, low-maintenance evergreen perennials boast industrial strength drought tolerance and deer resistance.

**'Cheyenne Sky' switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Cheyenne Sky')** – Starts out blue green in the spring, turns to wine red, and then deepens to burgundy in the fall. Handles poor dry soil and intermittent soaking, making it a good choice for rain gardens.

*praecox*) is Dr. Mellichamp's choice for January blooms that can't be beat. Hembree agrees, adding the "delicate winter blooms [have] a gorgeous fragrance."

The art of winter gardening lies in creating quieter, more restful compositions, not copying summer's exuberance. Still, you can get your "flower fix" as late as December or as early as January with hellebores, *Camellia*, or flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*). *Rhodoleia henryi* 'Scarlet Bells,' a new shrub introduction, is worth seeking out for bright red clusters of flowers that have shown no bloom damage at temperatures as low as 20 F. Again, group these gems where they

can be appreciated for maximum effect. And if possible, plant your hellebores on a slope so you can appreciate their exquisite but downward facing blooms. Cornelian cherry is a dogwood that blooms during the winter in Georgia! Hembree recommends this small tree for both its "exfoliating bark exposing varying splotches of green and gray" and "showy yellow flowers ... covering the entire tree in midwinter." ❄️

Helen Newling Lawson would rather bundle up than sweat it out in her Forsyth County garden. She is a freelance writer, marketing professional, and University of Georgia Master Gardener Extension Volunteer.