



Winter Garden Beauty

by Marilyn Loser

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In the winter, I spend a lot of time looking at flowering hibiscus, geraniums, and last summer's left over potted petunias in my small indoor greenhouse. However, I make it a point to get outside each day and walk around the garden. Winter is a great time to see the "bones" of a garden, to enjoy hoar frost sculptor on ornamental grasses, and watch birds peck at rose hips and dried berries.

In the summer I focus on the riot of color and flower shapes. In the winter I'm struck by the variety of green hues provided by evergreens, the deep blue sky, patches of white snow (if we're lucky), the shape of plant seed heads, and the brown geometry of trees and shadow.

The biggest spot of green is a 20-ft. tall Austrian Pine (*Pinus nigra* "Cimmarron"). Its dark forest green contrasts nicely with several 5-7 ft. tall, bluish green, Sea Green Junipers (*Juniperus x media* 'Sea Green') that are next to it. The "Sunset Western Garden Book" says these junipers grow to 6 ft. by 6 ft.. The ones I planted in 2000 are larger than this. If you plant any, make sure to give them plenty of room! Nearby is a 10 ft. by 10 ft. patch of slivery blue, 6 in. high Blue Rug Juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltonii').

I have a couple of survivor, medium green Mugo Pines (*Pinus mugo* spp?). I've had mixed luck with mugos. Several died early on. I have no idea why. I thought I'd planted them in suitable spots and gave them enough water. If anyone out there has had repeated good luck with mugos, please give me some tips! One mugo, that stated on its tag that it would grow to 4 ft. in height, is now at least 10 ft. tall. I bought it from a big-box store – something I don't do anymore. It didn't fit my garden design, but if I've learned anything from gardening over the years, it's to be flexible! I've let Mother Nature have her way as the mugo is in the open and not harming any other plants or structures.

Birds cleaned any sunflower seeds from nodding blossoms by November. White Snowberries (*Symphoricarpos* spp.), Gooseberries (*Ribes* spp.) and Buffaloberries (*Shepherdia argentea*) have mostly disappeared. Only a few birds search the yard this time of the year.

There is actually a bit of red in my winter garden. The stalks of Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus serica*), as well as the seed heads of Hens and Chicks (*Jovibarba globifera*) and Autumn Joy (*Sedum telephium* 'Autumn Joy') dot the garden.

My favorite winter seed pods include hops, asters, and Indian Blanket flowers. The cone-like hops adorn trellises and fences. Asters and Blanket flowers leave open husks that almost look like flowers and wave in the breeze.

This morning, it is bright and windless – a great time to look at the trunk and branches of deciduous trees and see if any pruning is needed. A couple of branches of our largest ash tree need a trim to prevent them from hitting the house during windstorms. I also noticed a few branches that are crossing over one another on both a Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) tree and a Robinson Crabapple (*Malus 'Robinson'*). I didn't notice this when the trees were in full leaf. In each case, I'll decide which branch to eliminate.

I looked for any broken branches and happily didn't see any. I'll need to prune a branch off the top of one of my ash trees as it has co-dominate leaders. Most trees thrive with a single dominate top branch; exceptions to this are crabapples. I try to keep the most central one.

I love to stand in the garden and dream this time of the year. It doesn't require much labor! That's for my future, spring self.

"The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music." Ralph Waldo Emerson