

Enjoying Winter Gardening

By Horticulturist Sam Maupin

There are many secrets hidden in the garden that can be discovered by winter gardening. Getting to know the plants during all of their seasons increases our awareness and broadens our perspective as gardeners. Remaining active on short, winter days helps prepare the garden for spring, and keeps up our fitness too. By just observing the slowed-down simplicity of the winter landscape, we can relate to how our plants interpret the soil, each other, and the stars above. Solstice marks the time that winter begins and the days start growing longer, and we should celebrate this with our plants.

Plants are so dynamic through the seasons, it is unfair to judge them at first sight. Plants like red-osier dogwood and cryptomeria show off their ornamental value during winter, while some like valerian and echinacea become potent medicinally, and others become ready to eat, like medlar pears or Jerusalem artichoke. Designing the garden with winter interest in mind will keep gardeners visiting and enjoying what the season has to offer. Studying all the plants during this time helps us understand their annual cycles and allows us to support their development. Our plants need us in order to thrive, so we shouldn't ignore them as soon as the weather turns.

Nature teaches us to slow down during short, winter days. When it's cold and dark, plants are dormant or slow-growing, and our gardening activities should mirror this. Avoiding injury and illness should be a priority, so waiting for agreeable weather to start small or ongoing projects is a good idea. During winter, the garden has shed all unnecessary burdens and focuses on deepening roots and strengthening wood. The winter gardener should be focused on maintaining physical health, through practicing cultural traditions like harvesting and making evergreen holiday decorations. Gardening just two-and-a-half-hours per week is enough to significantly reduce our risk of heart disease and various cancers, according to the Center for Disease Control. Remembering your garden during the holidays may save your life.

Winter weather can be uncomfortable, but it brings opportunities for the gardener. Observing the landscape during extreme weather teaches us how water runs, where winds blow, and where microclimates exist. This knowledge should guide us in making rain gardens, windbreaks, and new plantings. Fallen limbs and leaves are a great resource for building compost and garden beds. Observing the garden without leaves allows us to see with limited obstruction and makes pruning and thinning decisions easier. Noticing that weeds still grow during the winter should inspire plans for cold-season vegetable gardening, rather than contempt for out-of-place plants. By focusing on their core strength, plants are ready for the new growth that will come in the spring, and we shall do the same.