LANDSCAPING THE WINTER GARDEN
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The end of February 2014 may be the best time a garden-conscious homeowner has to contemplate changes in the area around their yard to highlight that space for more dramatic views ten months from now in the middle of the next snowy winter. Planting for a winter showcase outside your window, starts right there from your seat on a favorite chair as you read today’s newspaper. Pick an indoor spot from your window view to the outside that is one you particularly enjoy. To help you as you think about starting a project like this, take some pictures looking through the window as it appears now in the end of winter. Your pictures will help as you begin to consider the changes that will make that window view different next winter when you look outside.

As you look out the window, consider the light it receives over the day, what colors are most common in the space, and the kind of plants already in the garden. If your garden’s personality is dependent on annual flowers and a few perennials for spring and summer color, that bed space may look rather brown, flat, and bland now in late February. The elements you are looking for are color, shape, height, width, depth, and texture. So how can you get started, even now in late February or early March, with your pictures of this spot? Consider two things you can do now on a mild day when the weather entices you outdoors.

One of the easiest things you can do is to put a decorative object in some part of the area to be changed, and see how you like it as a focal point. A chair or bench, short stretch of old wrought iron or wooden fencing, or large rock might provide some special interest. Leave the piece in that spot to admire for the rest of this season; keeping it there for inspiration, as you ponder what would be a better choice. Another thing you can do is clean up the area to be updated by removing old plant material and pruning branches or limbs that are making the space look messy or crowded. Opening up the space a little, gives you the opportunity to visualize the spot differently, and time to think more about what you can do next.

Changes are going to emphasize color, shape, texture, size, and form. One of the stand-out ways to create color in the winter landscape is to use shrubs or small trees with ornamental berries or fruit. Three plants do that well: Winterberry, American Beautyberry, and a dwarf crabapple.

The Winterberry (Ilex verticillata), a rather upright small 8-10 ft. native shrubby tree, has glossy leaves through spring and summer. Another good choice for a showcase native plant would be the American Beautyberry (callicarpa americana). This bush has a waterfall appearance as its branches arch downward. When the plant loses its leaves in the fall the branches are thickly arrayed with the small vibrant magenta berry clusters. Against snow in particular, and in bright light, the berries more than do their share to brighten up the landscape. These berries are a favorite of birds. In the interest of providing color, and perhaps wildlife attraction, the small or dwarf forms of crabapple or cherry add a lot of value. Two varieties of a dwarf crabapple tree to consider would be: Morning Princess or Royal Beauty.
Winter is ending, but now is the time to think about how February 2015 can look outside your window. If you move around plants you already have, invest in new plants, and place some decorative weather-friendly artifacts into your landscape you can have a lovely warm spot indoors from which to savor your winter garden. Starting with the view from your window, you can expand the scope of that scene, and bring a new look to your winter landscape with the color, shape, form, and fancy of plants and objects you treasure and love. Give it a try and enjoy your accomplishment.

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