

Cheerful winter bloomers

By Linda Roe

The year I learned to appreciate winter-blooming flowers was the year my father died. Walking the grounds of Evergreen Hospice with my mother and smelling the faint, sweet scent coming from the soft pink flowers of Viburnum “Pink Dawn” offered a note of cheerfulness to a gray, gloomy time. That was many years ago, and now I enjoy winter bloomers for the brightness they bring to the garden on a rainy day.

I fill my pots with white and yellow winter pansies, mixing them with other colors that strike my fancy. I like to experiment with different colors every year. Pansies bloom on and off all winter when they get enough sunlight to set buds.

I have planted my little sidewalk garden with winter in mind. My laceleaf maple is underplanted with Lenten roses (Helleborus orientalis). The flowers are white, pink and purple, some of which are spotted. The new cultivars that come on the market every year are tempting to add. Look for big, ruffled doubles and those that are clear lemon yellow. Lenten roses bloom in February and are very easy to grow. Trim

off last year’s old, leathery leaves for a tidy display of flowers.

Christmas roses, another species of Hellebore, bloom around Christmas. The flowers are usually white. The new type I had to have is called “Pink Frost.” It is a blush-pink flower that fades to an antique rose color. It is sturdy and lasts a long time. Both species of Hellebore like a little lime, so add a handful to your flowers when liming the lawn.

Sprinkled in with my spring bulbs are the dainty pink flowers of the true hardy cyclamen (Cyclamen coum). I have them planted in front, where the small flowers won’t get lost. When the flowers are done, the silvery, mottled leaves are just as attractive. They go dormant in summer, at which point I overplant with sweet alyssum.

The hummingbird feeder on my front porch is kept filled all winter. In the backyard I’ve planted a treat for myself and the birds: a bright yellow winter blooming hybrid Oregon grape (Mahonia) called “Charity.” The showy clusters of flowers bloom in December and continue through January. This big, showy plant likes shade and can light up a gloomy corner.

A whole winter garden could be designed around witch hazel. A deciduous shrub

with a wide-spreading shape, it has yellow, orange or red flowers that bloom along its bare branches as early as January. Throw a bag of early crocus corms underneath it in the fall, then plant some pretty primroses in spring for three months of color. The Viburnum “Pink Dawn” that was such cheerful comfort is also a large deciduous shrub, but it grows more upright than witch hazel. Both of these shrubs have the bonus of good fall color.

There are a couple of winter-blooming evergreens that can be planted in your yard. The showiest is the winter camellia, or Camellia sasanqua. They have single or semi-double flowers in white, shades of pink or the popular bright red “Yuletide.” The flower buds freeze in very cold weather, so plant it in a protected spot.

Sarcococca is very hardy and great when planted close to the front door. It blooms in January with tiny greenish-white flowers that hardly show amid the foliage, but give off a sweet fragrance. There are two commonly grown Sarcococca. One of them, S. ruscifolia, is a 3-foot shrub. The other,



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S. humilis, is a groundcover that spreads by underground runners. Both prefer shade and will tolerate some dry shade.

Gardeners who live in warm microclimates should try the winter daphne, Daphne odora. The small clusters of light pink flowers have a wonderful fragrance that wafts through the whole garden in late winter. Daphnes need good drainage, and winter daphnes prefers light shade.

Don’t wait for a sad time to call attention to cheerful winter bloomers. Plant a few to greet your holiday guests as they arrive to celebrate good times. ■

- *Information courtesy of Wight’s Home & Garden*