

Ask a Master Gardener

January 26, 2016

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Finding Interest in the Winter Garden

Q. Like many gardeners, I find winter difficult when I look outside and see a dull landscape; are there some plants that add color, beauty, and interest to my boring brown garden? Anna Shultz

A. First, take some cheer in the fact that there are only 54 days until the vernal equinox occurs on Sunday, March 20th at 12:31 am. Spring will happen! In the meantime there are a few things you can do to add color. You can enjoy an immediate boost by planting some pansies or violas, *Viola wittrockiana*. The best time to plant pansies is actually October, but you can do so now by choosing a protected area when the ground is not frozen. After planting, the plants should be watered in with a liquid fertilizer, and you should follow up by fertilizing at least once a month. It has been warmer this year than some winters, but if freezing occurs the plants will show some stress. However, pansies and violas will usually snap back when it warms up. Remember these plants are annuals and have to be replaced each year.

Another thing you can do is to attend the Carroll County Master Gardener program on February 11th; James Hembree, a horticultural expert, will be speaking about creating interest in the winter garden. James will be speaking about 25-30 winter bloomers; he will be acquainting the group about some favorites and some unusual winter bloomers. A well-loved favorite is the Lenten rose or *Helleborus orientalis*, and unlike the pansies, hellebores are perennials and should be an item in your garden for many years. This plant will require some time to produce blooms, however, because it grows so slowly. In spite of the slow growth, the hellebore is prolific in producing offspring. Not all nurseries have the plant for sale, and it is a bit pricy. However, it will reward you with many babies which can grow near the parent plants or be transplanted to another area in your garden. It is also forgiving and flexible in environmental conditions; it will flourish in our red clay with only an annual application of a balanced fertilizer. Hellebores need some sun but love the afternoon shade. As in most beds, hellebores need mulching, but it is important not to cover too deeply because the tender new plants need to be able to get through. Hellebores blooms range from white to burgundy, and they start in January and continue through March. A bonus is that the dark green foliage will be beautiful all year.

James will also be speaking about edgeworthia, *Edgeworthia chrysantha*, which was introduced to the English garden by Michael Edgeworth in the early 1800's. The Japanese used it for high quality wallpaper, calligraphy, and bank notes which were almost impossible to forge. That is the history behind one of the common names, oriental paperbush. It also was valued by earlier generations for several medicinal purposes. The edgeworthia has a forest background and likes an acid soil; however, it will tolerate a neutral one as long as it is well drained and moist. The blooms have a sweet aroma, and the deciduous shrub will grow to 4-5 feet.

Another plant with a really sweet aroma is the winter daphne, *Daphne odoro*, but unlike the hellebores and the edgeworthia the winter daphne is not easy to grow. Walter Reeves and Erica Glasener wrote about the daphne in their book, *Georgia Gardener's Guide*. Walter recommends

planting in the early spring with carefully amended soil. The daphne hates wet feet, so drainage is critical, and it is very finicky about fertilizer. Do not over fertilize. Mulch is vital, and Walter suggests that placing the daphne in a large pot, at least 16", might be an easier solution. In spite of the difficulties, the beauty and sweet aroma make the extra care worthwhile. Walter reminds us that on a cold February day, a single bloom from a winter daphne is enough to remind us that spring will come again.

These are only three of the plants that James Hembree will discuss at the regular monthly meeting of the Master Gardeners on February 11th. Anyone is welcome to attend to learn more about the interesting plants of winter. If you care to join us for dinner, bring a dish to share and show up by 6:00 pm. If you only want to attend the program, it will start by 7:00 pm. The gorgeous plants shown in the photos were photographed by WH Smith in his garden which is interesting at any season.

If you have questions about any gardening issues, contact a Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Cooperative Extension Carroll County office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu; call 770-836-8546 for any other details or go to <http://www.ugaextension.com/carroll/anr/MasterGardenerPage.html>