



A Berry Wintry Garden

The back-and-forth, now-you-see-me-now-you-don't game autumn and winter play every November has ended, and winter has won. Even on the mildest days, the verdict is in: the trees stripped of leaves, with bark squeaking when branches rub together in winter winds; the flower beds boasting nothing but brown scraps; the pond iced over on the coldest mornings. Even Raphael, my cupid fountain, is shrouded in a tarp. Cast of bronze, he could easily stand unprotected for a hundred years—given his age, he probably already has—but water left in his pool would freeze, expand, and cut the rubber liner, so the whole thing had to be covered. Along with the water I removed ten huddled frogs, so cold they protested only feebly when I scooped them into a bucket and took them to the pond. It has a nice mucky bottom where they can burrow down in comfort until spring.

But a winter garden palette doesn't have to be limited to shades of grey and brown. We're blessed with a wide range of native trees and shrubs whose colorful berries persist well into winter. Most are a festive red, but if you're going for an edgier vibe, you can find blue, white, purple, even almost-black. All are important food sources for birds and small mammals in a season of scarcity. And, as they jostle for food, the birds will bring an extra element of color and energy to otherwise drab surroundings.

Start with the hollies. You're probably most familiar with the shiny, spiky leaves of the ubiquitous English hollies, but consider their native cousins. Inkberry, *Ilex glabra*, has small rounded leaves. As its name suggests, the berries are usually black. Winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*, is utterly nondescript in summer, but come winter it drops its dull leaves and covers its bare branches with clusters of bright red berries. The highly decorative stems are a go-to for florists during the holidays. All hollies are dioecious, meaning plants are either male or female, and one of each is needed to be sure of berries. It's easiest to choose a female plant when the berries are already forming. Since the males aren't showy, they can be tucked away into an inconspicuous corner.

Staghorn sumac, *Rhus typhina*, gets a bad rap, unfairly: it isn't poison sumac, won't give you a rash, and produces furry clusters of dark red fruit that hold well through winter. It's quite aggressive, though, so plant it in a wild or semi-wild part of your yard and let it roam.

Poison ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans*, on the other hand, is still dangerous after its leaves fall—but only to humans. Its greenish or white berries (technically called drupes) are an important food source for many birds, so if you have enough space, leave some to grow in a distant corner.

The native pagoda dogwood, *Cornus alternifolia*, produces clusters of small white flowers that develop into dark berries. Because it stays fairly small, it can be planted anywhere you like, even under power lines.

Among the viburnums, the American cranberry bush, *V. trilobum*, offers a trifecta of white flowers in spring, vibrant fall foliage, and red berries. Arrowwood, *V. dentata*, has blue-black berries. Make sure you plant several in order to ensure pollination. Nannyberry, *V. lentago*, also has blue-black berries, and they are known for lasting well into winter.

Not technically berries, but still colorful and welcome food sources for wildlife, are roses and crabapples. Did you know they're both in the same plant family, *Rosaceae*? Look closely at the fruits and you'll immediately see the resemblance. A rose left unpruned after flowering will produce rose hips of various sizes and colors, depending on the variety. The rangy, very thorny, invasive beach rose, *Rosa rugosa*, will cover itself with large, tomato-red fruits from September until the birds eat the last one. The birds know a good thing when they see it: rose hips have 20 times the Vitamin C of an orange! (If you just can't get enough winter color, and are willing to live dangerously, plant the Chinese winged thorn rose, *Rosa sericea* subsp. *Omeiensis* f. *pteracantha*. This rose is grown specifically for its large, triangular, bright red thorns. They do light up rather spectacularly when the sun shines through from behind...but I think I'll pass.)

Crabapple fruits develop in exactly the same way as rose hips, and also cling to the tree until plucked. Most apple varieties are imports, but we do have a few natives (or at least, varieties that arrived in North America so long ago that they're considered native). One is *Malus coronaria*, which fruits averaging $\frac{3}{4}$ "-1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter.

With several of these berried beauties in your yard, you'll create a bright landscape to enjoy through the drearier months. At the same time you'll help re-establish the native food sources essential to maintaining our native bird population. Plant as many as you can!