

'A Winter Garden Sets The Stage'

Garden Designer Offers Year-Round Plant Suggestions

By MELANIE MULLINAX
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When Donna Williamson looks at a late fall or winter landscape, she sees majestic sycamore branches reaching into the clear blue sky like hands with long delicate fingers.

She notices the beautiful, reddish-colored bark of the small Coral Bark Maple that often goes unnoticed during the spring and summer months when the tree is covered with foliage.

She appreciates the varying colors of ground foliage and vines, in shades of yellow, orange, and variegated green. And she marvels at the deep green shiny smooth leaves of a sturdy magnolia tree.

Williamson, a garden designer and owner of Fine Gardening, insists that a garden in winter can be both interesting and helpful in setting the stage for a budding spring garden. "People get hung up on flowers, but flowers have their season to bloom, then they are gone. Foliage is there all the time, setting the framework for a garden," Williamson said. "Look at this ginger plant," she said, pointing to a ground plant with healthy green leaves variegated with silvery streaks. "Not many flowers last such a long time and have such beautiful markings."

Williamson shares her love of year-round gardening and her appreciation of the winter landscape and year-round foliage by teaching gardening classes throughout the seasons for Frederick County Parks and Recreation, Shenandoah University College of Lifelong Learning, and several classes in Waterford.

She said that while this time of year may be a little late to plant new trees and plants, it's a perfect time of year to enjoy nature's beauty, observe what the plants and trees look like in their winter form and plan for the spring.

Her approach to gardening is simple. "Find what you like, look at the conditions you have, and decide how your space is going to be used," she said.

Often times, people look at their winter garden, see a brown and barren landscape formed by an overuse of mulch. "I am not a fan of using a lot of mulch," she said. "Instead, you can fill those spaces with foliage producing plants that add color and interest throughout the year," she said.

One example is Golden Moneywort. From the lysimachia family, "It produces flat tiny chartreuse leaves in the spring. In the fall they turn bronze and burgundy and reduce some in the cold but leaf out again in the spring. It really covers the ground, but everything, the perennials and the bulbs, can come up through it in the spring," Williamson said.

She also likes ornamental grasses like the Blue Oat grass. "There are so many grasses to choose from, whole books are written on them," she said.

So how is a novice gardener or even an experienced one to choose? "Gardening is a lot like anything else you love," Williamson said. "If you



Donna Williamson (above), garden designer, assists in planning even during the winter with plants and trees such as the magnolia surrounding her, the ginkgo (far left) and cabbage (left).

Star Photos by Jeff Taylor and Scott Mason



love antiques, you go to museums and shops and look at antiques because you love them. Over time, you sort of develop this workbook idea in your head of what you love and what will work. It's the same with gardening. A lot of it is puzzling. But you approach it with a little bit of knowledge and a lot of love."

Marilyn Steere of Frederick County is a lifelong gardener, and a student of Williamson. Although she comes to classes with plenty of gardening experience, Steere said she always leaves Williamson's classes inspired. "Donna has such a wealth of knowledge about gardening . . . such a common sense approach to gardening," Steere said.

She has also learned to enjoy her winter garden. "At this point, I go out and still see what is growing. I also plan on how I might change things around in the spring," she said. "I used to try to baby the plants that weren't growing well. Now if they are not growing well or looking healthy, I pull them up and plant something new," she said. "Life is too short and gardening should be fun. Donna really has a way of putting life into gardening."

Maybe that's because life is what she sees. It's true that the brilliant colors of summer flowers have now faded, and the energy of the

buzzing bees and the fluttering butterflies has subsided. But in the stillness of a dormant garden, Williamson said there are surprises waiting to be found. Pointing to a small weeping yellow variegated pine with distinct branches in a Winchester garden, Williamson smiles at its charm. "I love this pine. The loose branches look like the waving arms of a dancer," she said.

Williamson said she teaches her students about gardening during all four seasons. She helps them understand when to prune, what bulbs to use, how to play with color, how to layer plants, and more. But what she really wants to accomplish through her teaching and her business is to instill in her students and her clients the joy of gardening.

"So much of the gardening advice that I see is just people trying to sell something. A lot of clients that I work for have gone to a nursery where they were given a garden design and the nursery came in and put the garden in. A few years later they end up having a garden that really doesn't belong to them." Williamson said those gardens usually require a lot of maintenance which drains the joy from gardening.

"Gardening as a hobby is something people can do their entire lives. It fills you up with the wind, the sounds of the birds, and the feel of the

Color can add excitement to any garden with a bromeliad (far left), ginkgo tree (left) Gelsmium, (above). With careful planning, the winter garden can be enjoyable and colorful.

sun. It should never be stressful," she said. "I really encourage people to take a deep breath and enjoy."

Williamson will be teaching a course entitled "Terrific Low Maintenance Gardens," through Shenandoah University College of Life Long learning beginning Feb. 3. She will follow that course with another on "Designing with Trees & Shrubs" beginning April 14. Both classes meet on Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Fee is \$74. For information on these programs, contact Pat Wilson at the College of Lifelong Learning at 665-5442 or visit www.su.edu/cont-ed/.