Winter Green—Plants with Persistent Foliage

IN THE GARDEN for February 2014 by Karma Larsen, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

“Spring is too far away to comfort even by anticipation, and winter long ago lost the charm of novelty. This is the very three a.m. of the calendar.” —Joseph Wood Krutch, writing about February in *Gardening in Eden*

Summer has an abundance of green. But deep into winter, the landscape has muted into tans, browns and grays. Windbreaks of pine and juniper offer periodic lines of green in the country, but even the smallest hint of green can draw our eye in a small landscape—a low groundcover edging a dormant lawn, ivy climbing a gray tree trunk, the surprisingly persistent foliage of coralbells.

For all the effort we put into selecting colorful blossoms for the summer, that long gray period mid-winter deserves at least as much attention. And surprisingly, there are lots of plants that do retain foliage and color into winter. We may select and plant them for other qualities, but many of our standard garden plants aren’t just one-season beauties. By giving them a place more visible from pathways and windows and by placing them to best effect—in the right combination, the right place or with the right backdrop—they’ll reward us with garden green, even through a dusting of snow.

Groundcovers like hens and chicks, periwinkle and sedum will remain green all winter. Thyme, sweet woodruff, pachysandra and germander will stay green for a good portion of it. Plants like coralbells, *Bergenia*, Lenten roses and foam flower (*Tiarella*) will retain their original foliage colors, from chartreuse to green to purple. For silvery green foliage, there’s Artemisia, yarrow, lamb’s ear, lavender, dianthus and yucca.

Many of the sedges go straight through the winter without changing color. Plantain-leaved sedge (*Carex plantaginea*) is a great example. Its large, straplike leaves remain green even under heavy snow. Other evergreen or semi-evergreen sedges include Gray’s, Pennsylvania and oak sedge (*Carex grayi, blanda* and *albicans*).

Shrubs with persistent foliage include St. Johns wort, sumac (gro-low) and cotoneaster, which offers the extra bonus of bright berries.

And then there’s purple. A whole host of plants turn beautiful shades of purple in winter. Prairie smoke is a low-lying native that is worth growing for winter foliage alone (beyond the pink flowers and beautiful, smoky seedheads). Columbine, coralbells, creeping mahonia, penstemon, hepatica and many other plants take on various shades of maroon to purple.

Winter colors tend to be subtle but the more variety and texture in the landscape, the more you’ll want to get outdoors—and that’s worth planning for. Photos of plants can be found at: http://www.pinterest.com/nearboretum/winter-persistent-foliage/.