



Bark Adds Interest in Winter

As autumn's cooler temperatures and blustery winds strip the leaves from trees leaving their skeletons leafless, the shapes and textures in the garden take on a greater importance.

The simple elegance of the landscape's form and texture no longer take second stage to colorful blooms and lush green foliage. The bark of woody plants and the textures created by stems and branching create interest in the absence of foliage and flowers.

We have long valued plants like birch and burning bush for their textural beauty, and they are planted in almost every neighborhood. While these are lovely additions to the landscape, there are many other underused plants that also add dramatic bark patterns and have sculptural qualities important in the winter garden.

The paperbark maple is a small ornamental tree that can be grown in part shade. Its bark exfoliates at an early age into paper-thin curls of golden cinnamon to fiery copper. Trifoliate leaves (leaves made up of three leaflets) are tinged with blue-green in summer and turn bright red and orange in the fall. Its slow growth makes it a perfect choice for the homeowner who wants an upright focal point but does not need quick shade.

Cherry-like bark and late-blooming flowers are the trademarks of the Pekin lilac. It has showy, creamy white flowers that smell a bit like privet. Tree lilacs are adaptable plants for sunny gardens.

You need a bit of patience for some plants to show their bark potential. Parrotia and Kousa dogwood are both small trees that need a chance to mature before their bark patterns become evident. Both have many other ornamental characteristics that make the wait well worth it.

Parrotia has multiple trunks that twist and turn eventually becoming quite knobby and furrowed. They grow upright and have a shrubby appearance in their youth. Their foliage turns a gorgeous blend of red, orange and yellow in the fall.

As Parrotia trees mature, the bark begins to peel and shred forming lovely patterns. Multiple branches accent the peeling bark increasing the interest. They are easy to grow and once established, they tolerate periods of drought.

Kousa dogwoods also develop a multicolored pattern of exfoliating bark as they age. They are valued for their colorful autumn foliage and their striking horizontal branching. Milky white flowers appear in May after mild winters. Severe winters wreak havoc on their otherwise abundant blooms.

The Cornelian cheery dogwood is also known for its scaly and flaky bark, along with yellow flowers as early as March. Golden Glory is a variety with an upright and narrow growth habit.

Both of these dogwoods prefer a partially shaded site. Because of their slow growth, they can be used as a large shrub for many years.

A beautiful and often overlooked tree is the Carolina silverbell. The bark of young trees is striped. Trees are often grown in clumps, or as multi-stemmed forms, to reinforce their characteristic striping. Their pendant, bell-shaped flowers are lovely when viewed from below.

Silverbells may be a bit more challenging to grow, but are very rewarding when conditions are right. Good drainage and a protected site with soil that has been amended with peat give them the best chance of success.



Pines are also noted for their ability to develop attractive bark. Lace-bark and Tanyosho pines particularly stand out. The older branches of Lacebark pine develop irregular branches that alternate between light and dark, green, yellow and gray. Often seen on the grounds of Buddhist temples in the Orient, trees grow slowly to develop large, upsweeping branches - all the better to display the beautiful bark.

The picturesque form of the Tanyosho pine also calls to mind Oriental landscapes. The orange bark peels off in thin layers. Branches become tiered and layered – a natural bonsai effect.

The yew is another evergreen with beautiful bark. After the plant grows for a few years, coppery red is revealed on its trunk as the dark, outer bark peels away in uneven sections.

There are even vines that you can grow for winter effect. The climbing hydrangea is a gorgeous vine that will climb any rough textured surface. Mine grows up a silver maple tree where it has developed cinnamon colored exfoliating bark as it has matured.

Their papery flower clusters dry in place and are still visible in winter. The branches grow across their support creating an attractive winter silhouette. Careful pruning after the leaves have fallen enhances their shape and brings out their best qualities.

It's important to consider the flowers and foliage when choosing the next woody plants for your landscape, but don't forget to consider their bark. Choose plants with interesting bark and you'll appreciate the winter season in your garden as much as the other three.



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