

Northwest Garden News November - December, 2004

Northwest gardeners have a difficult time adjusting to the slippery slide into winter. Although the autumnal equinox signals a shift in the rhythm of the seasons we are loath to accept the inevitable even as most plants prepare for their winter hiatus. In a crescendo of incendiary color the foliage of deciduous trees and shrubs assume shades of glittering yellow, copper, burnished orange and fiery red. Ornamental grasses tremble and dance in the wind while perennials shout their last hurrah in a palette of fiesta colors.

As the initial barrage of storms make landfall we know that the jig is up. In a final, frenzied flurry we engage in the ritualistic tasks that signal the transition from active to passive gardening. Raking and composting leaves becomes a Herculean undertaking. Then there are all those bulbs that looked so tempting on catalog pages and on nursery shelves (I don't remember ordering or buying nearly that many—do you)? You know you are late getting them into the ground when they start sprouting in their bags. Garden furniture needs to be moved into already overflowing basements and garages. Hoses need to be disconnected and irrigation systems drained. Oh—the list goes on.

A last gasp visit to the local nursery reminds me just how out of sync I am with the wonderful world of retail. Baskets and boxes that just weeks ago were brimming with bulbs, those irresistible harbingers of spring, are empty. The can yard of perennials and grasses are void of plants. In their place colorful displays of Indian corn, gourds, bales of straw and faux Christmas trees bedecked with ornaments herald the impending holiday season.

The first few weeks of my weather imposed winter hibernation are spent dealing with all the household projects that were put on hold in late, last winter. Like a whirling dervish I sort through piles of paperwork and magazines, clean out closets and drawers, wax the bathroom floor, oil the woodwork and furniture, wash windows and resume work on one of the many ongoing painting projects. My flirtation with domestic bliss is short lived—I think that what

appeals to me is a romanticized ideal of nesting—settling in for the duration—pots of soup bubbling on the wood burning stove, cuddling with the cats and decorating the house for Christmas. By the time the Great Turkey arrives I am ready to embark on the most critical phase of the gardening year—dreaming, scheming and planning for next year.

My fallow season is spent perusing piles of garden magazines, reading stacks of garden related books and pouring over mail order plant catalogs making lists as I go. Hours are devoted to peering out my third floor studio window watching as the garden discards the exuberant trappings of autumn and assumes the spare, elegant mantle of winter. As the deciduous trees and shrubs lose their leaves and perennials slump to the ground the spare outlines of the garden re-emerge. As the skeleton of the garden is revealed those spaces and places that lack structural plants become apparent. Now is the time to flag or stake spots that need an evergreen tree or shrub to screen a view, provide visual interest or create a year-round focal point. This is the time to walk through local parks and arboretums looking for plants with interesting winter bark, berries, flowers and foliage to fill some of those holes. Even small gardens have room for winter blooming shrubs and small trees.

Photographs, taken over the course of the year, come under intense scrutiny as I review the garden season by season looking for those areas that need editing or revision, spaces where plants have died or spots where the planting combinations failed. Tracing paper is a gardeners' best friend helping even those with no formal drawing skills to formulate criteria for replacement plants. Lay a piece of tracing paper over an enlarged photograph and sketch the outlines of a variety of plant forms, textures and shapes. You begin to define what different plant characteristics would do to alter the space, ie —do you need an upright conifer or a shrub with a weeping habit or a perennial with large leaves to contrast with surrounding plants that are finely textured? Once you know what the plant needs to contribute to the overall design you can begin formulating a list of plants that might work in the space.

While Old Man Winter conspires to keep us inside and out of the garden on really nasty winter days we can use that time to dream and plan for spring.