

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 01-31-07) Cool Winter Plant Choices © 2007

This winter I've happily been able to visit and explore several local gardens. I'm always looking at the plants (of course). Several plants caught my eye and nose. You might want to be tempted by them too.

Sarcococca, also known as Sweet Box, is an evergreen shrub with teeny tiny white feathery looking flowers blooming this time of year. The scent is incredible outdoors but I find it almost too strong indoors. If you have allergies, keep the plant outdoors at all times, even though you'll be very tempted to snip a sprig to bring inside. The leaves of Sarcococca are shiny dark green, marching in pairs up the stems. Tiny white flowers are nestled amongst the leaves. Sarcococca will grow well in shade or partial shade. It's ideal planted near a doorway or along a frequently used path, as well as in containers.

If you haven't yet planted a witch hazel in your garden, now's the time to haunt local nurseries for temptation. This plant's proper name is Hamamelis. Flowers bloom in shades of yellow, orange and red. Many are wonderfully scented. You'll find shrubs to choose from, along with small trees. This woody plant is best seen in bloom when making a selection. The 2001 Sunset Western Garden edition says the flowers resemble shredded coconut; it's an apt description.

Daphne is another sweetly scented, very early blooming woody shrub. Choices abound. Again, you'll want to visit your favorite nursery now to see, feel and smell the blooms and foliage of these "must have" shrubs for our northwest gardens. There are many varieties suitable for container gardening.

I have a somewhat tropical jasmine vine that began its life as a houseplant, finally making its overgrown way into my outside garden to vine its way up several trellises in several locations, ending up in a container again. About every other year it dies back to the ground. I've finally decided to give it a decent burial by composting it. And I have plans for the soon vacated container. Read on.

The somewhat diminutive Camellia sasanqua is a more open growing plant than our traditional upright bushy varieties. This sprightly shrub can be grown happily in a container, which is exactly what I plan to do. Guess which container? The hard part is to decide between the white variety or pink or red. I'm leaning quite strongly to the white choice. I was first smitten by this plant at Valley Nursery in Poulsbo, but check your own favorite nursery for it too.

Another fun winter plant is Cupressus macrocarpa 'Wilma Goldcrest.' You'll often see this chartreuse green lemon-lime scented small evergreen tree as the focal plant in container combinations. When it first came into favor as a container plant, it was not very cold hardy. Now, this plant happily lives either in gardens or containers, while withstanding wicked weather with aplomb. It will do best, though, in a sheltered location. This fairly slow grower could actually become 16 to 30 feet tall by 6 to 9 feet wide. My friend Cynthia has a pair of these beauties, kept under control by frequent pruning for her wreath making classes each fall and winter.