

Go Native!

Gardening with native plants on Lake George

BY EMILY DEBOLT

You may have heard about the benefits of landscaping with native plants, but you may still be wondering just what these miracle plants are – and if a garden of native plants will look like the weeds along the side of the road. While they may not be miracle workers, native plants come in an amazing array of shapes, sizes, and colors – creating attractive gardens with four seasons of interest. Far from being weedy and unkept in appearance, native gardens can create beautiful and functional landscapes. “Go Native” highlights a different plant each month to introduce you to some of the native plants from our forests and fields that are right at home in your own backyard.

January’s Plant of the Month Winterberry *Ilex verticillata*

While sharp, pointy, and evergreen may come to mind when you think holly, the hollies that grow here in the Northeast look a bit different. The most common and hardiest is winterberry and while it isn’t sharp, pointy, or evergreen, it does have the classic red berries you think of when you think holly. Winterberry is hardy to zone 3, making it a great choice for North Country gardeners. Since it loses its leaves in the fall (it is deciduous), there is no greenery to interfere with the stem full of bright red berries, making it striking in an

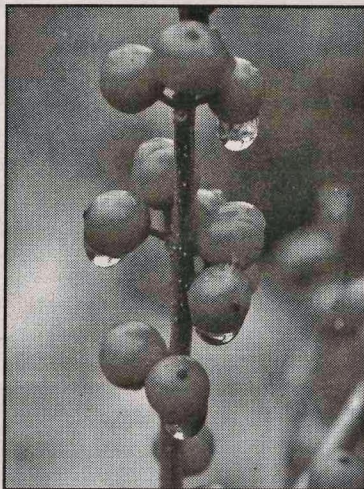


Photo by Emily DeBolt

often bleak winter landscape.

Winterberry is an adaptable shrub, found in swamps and thickets and along streams and lakes in the natural landscape. While it may prefer wet feet, winterberry can be grown in well-drained soils, but is not drought tolerant, and like all hollies it prefers slightly acidic soils. Reaching up to 10 ft high, and almost as wide, be sure to give this shrub room to grow. Plant it 4 ft apart to create a hedgerow, in groupings for mass, or alone as a specimen. Winterberry works well in rain gardens, along the lakeshore, or in most places around the yard for that matter.

Winterberry can grow in full sun to partial shade, but if berry production is the goal, plant in full sun. Cut stems covered in berries will keep for months for holiday decorations. While over 40 species of birds are known to eat the fruit, they don’t do so until mid-winter, meaning you get to enjoy the berries much longer than many of the other berries in the garden. Birds such as

chickadees and cardinals use other winter food sources first and only eat the berries once their other foods have dwindled because the berries of winterberry are astringent and bitter.

All hollies are dioecious, meaning the plants are either male or female. Both sexes flower, but only the female plants have berries. Flowering is in June, and the branches are covered with small white flowers which you might not notice if it wasn’t for all the attention the neighborhood bees were giving them. You can sex a winterberry by looking at its flowers, so you will either want to learn this skill or be sure to buy your plants from a nursery that already has the plants labeled. You need 1 male nearby (I recommend about 50 ft to be safe) for about every 3-5 females in order to be sure you will have berries. You can hide the male off in the corner of your yard if you like, as many gardeners do.

If you do buy cultivars instead of the straight species, be sure that you pair them up correctly. Winterberry cultivars have been selected from different northern and southern varieties – so they bloom at different times. To ensure pollination you need your male and female to bloom at the same time. If trying to keep the details of sex and cultivar straight is too confusing for you, just be sure to speak with knowledgeable nursery staff that can help you select the correct plants to meet your landscaping goals.

Emily DeBolt is an owner of Fiddlehead Creek Farm and Native Plant Nursery in Hartford, NY. For more info about gardening with native plants, contact Emily can at Emily@fiddleheadcreek.com.