A Winter Friend
By Matt Welch

January holds a valuable pause for gardeners, a sort of limbo between fall cleanup and late winter preparations, when you can take a deep breath and calmly ponder. Now may be the very best time of year to unabashedly enjoy your garden, free of all the usual seasonal maintenance issues. It’s a time to dream up future plans and plant acquisitions, and to reflect on past gardening decisions, both good and bad.

As you stroll through your paradise, take a long look at what’s around you. Has your garden’s glory been reduced to stubby skeletons of perennials past, or perhaps cavernous craters left behind after the frenzied plucking of annual castor beans? Are you still relying on that one last reddish-brown leaf dangling limply on the Japanese maple to provide some brand of color to your landscape? Be honest.

If you can answer yes to any of the above rhetoric, fear not. Although I cannot solve all your gardening winter woes, perhaps I can help: it may be time to consider a conifer. As some of you know, the Arboretum has been boldly plowing into the world of ornamental conifers for the last few years, and we are emerging victorious. Many specimens of this ancient group of plants previously thought impossible to grow in Texas have proven themselves quite hardy. We’ve scoured the globe for new species and cultivated varieties, so it comes as no surprise to find out that one of the superstars of the collection is native to China.

Unfortunately, a botanist found this plant before a horticulturist did, so the name is forever soaked in the formaldehyde of botanical taxonomy: Thuja orientalis var. juniperoides. But don’t let the ugly name scare you; this large shrubby conifer is a knockout, especially in winter. The growth habit of this Thuja is best described as billowy. Soft, mounding layers of foliage make for a shrub that is friendly on the eyes and the skin. In spring and summer the color is a cloudy blue-green; not at all unattractive, but certainly not the most noticeable plant in the landscape. The miracle of this plant occurs every fall immediately after the first frost. Within days of the first freezing winter air, the blue-green foliage is replaced by a fantastic purple plum hue with bluish highlights at the tips of the branches: a purple cloud with a silver lining. I can’t think of any evergreen, broadleaf or conifer, that undergoes a more dramatic metamorphosis than our Thuja. Come spring, the plant packs up her brilliant burgundy winter décor and replaces it with spring and summer’s inconspicuous blue-green.

Not reaching over 6’ high by 5’ wide, this plant requires no maintenance. Although definitely not a dry garden species, Thuja prefers to be in soil that leans toward the dry side. Not a fan of a full day’s sun (but in need of at least morning to noon sun), this plant will thrive best planted beside an east-facing wall.

If you’d like to see Thuja orientalis var. juniperoides in her winter glory, just walk into the conifer collection behind the Art Building; you can’t miss it. It has been said that the best gardens are found in the winter, so in your endless quest for the next great plant, consider making a winter friend.
The Magnolia family is huge, complex and exciting. Of course, in the South the three that stand out are Magnolia grandiflora (Southern Magnolia), M. virginiana (sweetbay), and M. soulangiana (saucer). The SFA Mast Arboretum has a fine collection of species, varieties, hybrids and seed selections. There are many and they perform beautifully. In the South they are not subject to injury by insects or animals. The Dragon ship is a columnar tree sporting large leaves and creamy yellow small fragrant flowers. M. platypetala is another large flowered banana "shrub"—a tree—that is native to Ruby M. Zine Azealea Garden— and reports indicate that the species is hardy into Zone 7. Time will tell.

Native Plant Expert Featured at February Les Reeves Lecture Series

Jill Nokes, well-known author, landscape designer, wholesale nursery owner, and proponent of native plants, will be the featured speaker for the February 19th Les Reeves Lecture Series at 7:00 p.m. in Room 110 of the Agriculture Building. Her lecture, titled "Flor y Canto– Flower and Song- Xoxhitl en Cuicatl" will explore the ethno-botanical garden in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Nokes’ book on the propagation and cultivation of native Texas plants, How to Grow Native Plants of Texas and the Southwest, is one of the first books in our region to promote the use and production of native plants and naturalistic landscape design. Books will be available for purchase at the lecture.

In her landscape design business, Nokes works both with commercial and residential clients, helping them to develop a sustainable plan using native Texas plants, shrubs, and vines in their own gardens. The best features are the line drawings—of the foliage, flower, and ultimate shape of the plant—and the listings of plant characteristics, coverage, foliage, flower, fruit, landscape values, ultimate size, USDA growth zone, common and scientific names, and whether the plant is evergreen or not. If you have an idea of the genus, you can look up details in a snap. Related cultivars are given under remarks, so it’s easy to build up collections. Notation on a small southern US map shows where the plant can be expected to grow well. Both common and scientific names are listed in the detailed index. Finally, there is also an illustrated glossary of terms used in the descriptions (e.g., whorl, anther).

Great Horticulture Books

When it is too cold to be in the garden this winter, why not curl up with a great garden book? The SFA Mast Arboretum staff chose a few of their favorites to share with you.


Barb Stump, Research Associate, really enjoys Identification, Selection, and Use of Southern Plants for Landscape Design by Neil Odendall and James Turner and has included the following enticing information: “This book is my idea of a great garden reference book, because it is arranged like a field guide. I turn to this book constantly to help me decide where to plant specific trees, shrubs, and vines in my own gardens. The best features are the line drawings—of the foliage, flower, and ultimate shape of the plant—and the listings of plant characteristics, covering foliage, flower, fruit, landscape values, ultimate size, USDA growth zone, common and scientific names, and whether the plant is evergreen or not. If you have an idea of the genus, you can look up details in a snap. Related cultivars are given under remarks, so it’s easy to build up collections. Notation on a small southern US map shows where the plant can be expected to grow well. Both common and scientific names are listed in the detailed index. Finally, there is also an illustrated glossary of terms used in the descriptions (e.g., whorl, anther).

There are other Magnolia family members that should be noted for their superior performance. Parakarya lotungensis is narrowly columnar and dense with foliage. Most exciting has been the show in the Michelia world. M. figo, banana shrub, is common, with many old specimens across the South. M. kinxineria, introduced in the 1990s, is more vigorous, easier to root, appears quite hardy, and is now commercially available in the trade. Bloom is similar in size to that of M. figo. M. wilsonii and M. sinensis may actually be synonyms for the same plant and hardiness remains a question. M. x foggi #2 sports larger leaves and flowers but suffers low temperature damage when temperatures fall into the teens. M. yunnanensis is shrubby, floriferous and vigorous in the

Matt Welch, Azealea Garden Technician, loves The Collector’s Garden by Ken Druse. He feels that this is the most inspirational garden book he has ever seen because of the incredible photographs, great articles, and awesome plants. Matt also recommends The Natural Garden by Ken Druse.

Elyce Rodewald, Education Coordinator, is currently enthralled with Native American Ethnobotany by Daniel Moreman. This book is the result of 25 years of study by the author and is a comprehensive reference of the plants used by Native American peoples for medicine, food, fiber, dye, ceremonial items, cleaning agents, and many other purposes. Elyce also enjoys pouring over the Seeds of Change catalog and the classic Rodale’s Guide to Organic Gardening.

Elyce encourages you to share the joy of gardening with a child this winter, and a great place to start is with these exceptional books that introduce children to horticulture at an early age:

The Gardener by Sarah Stewart During the depression, young Lydia Grace must move to the big city to work in her cantankerous uncle’s bakery. She brings joy and beauty with determination and a suitcase full of seeds.

The Money Tree by Sarah Stewart Miss McGillicuddy notices a strange tree growing in her yard, but doesn’t understand the neighbors’ preoccupation with its unusual leaves.

The Reason for a Flower and Plants That Never Bloom by Ruth Heller These beautifully illustrated books make botany fun and understandable for young children. Written in rhyme, you are sure to hear “read it again!” “And then you’ll see the reason for a flower—even weeds. The reason for a flower is to manufacture seeds…”

The Oxcart Man by Donald Hall Set in colonial New England, the cycle of the seasons is told by a child in the life of the oxcart man and his family.

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney Eccentric and adventurous Miss Rumphius finally finds a way to make the world more beautiful!

The Legend of the Bluebonnet by Tommie dePaola This story of compassion, sacrifice, and natural beauty is a wonderful way to introduce children to wildflowers and the amazing world of native plants.