

A winter's walk can be quite lovely

By Justin Evertson

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

Let's face it. Winter is not typically considered a great time to be outside in Nebraska. There is a reason so many birds fly south for the winter around here—it can be cold! Throw in a sharp north wind and some sleet or snow and it can be downright miserable. And yet, botanically speaking, winter is not completely without merit. In fact there are LOTS of good reasons to bundle up and venture outside to the garden and beyond this winter:

- Bark! Not the noise of dogs, but rather the protective layer woody plants produce as their outer skin. Winter is a great time to appreciate the detail of a good bark: sycamore with its cream and gray mottled patches; river birch and its peeling skin; the great reds and browns of ponderosa pine; the sinewy skin of hornbeam (*Carpinus*); the red stems of dogwood; and sloughing, beef jerky-like strips of shagbark.
- Winter architecture. Leaf drop helps reveal the true architectural character of trees. One of the best is the beautiful and nakedly coarse form of a mature Kentucky coffeetree. Bur oak, with its wide spreading crown and coarse, corky bark is also a winter beauty.
- Ornamental grasses. Many grasses planted in the landscape hold their form well throughout much of the winter. The Great Plains native little bluestem, festooned in hues of pinks and reds, is especially attractive. Other favorites include Korean reedgrass, miscanthus, our native switchgrass and the golden glow of Indiangrass.
- Winter greenery. Several species of plants are able to defy “old man winter” and retain greenness throughout the season. We are most familiar with pines, spruces and firs. Other, more uncommon evergreens to watch for include sharp-leaved hollies; our native holly-like creeping mahonia; several types of viburnum (*Alleghany*, *burkwood*, etc.); the groundcover vinca; and even a few herbaceous species such as plumbago and pasqueflower.
- Birds. Amazingly, many bird species choose to tough it out right in our own backyards. Tree sparrow, blue jay, cardinal, woodpecker, hawk, owl, waxwing, goldfinch, dove, titmouse, etc. How do they do it? How do their feet not freeze off? One of my favorites is the dark-eyed junco. Easily attracted to a ground feeder, this little fellow will feed right at the back door, and may even come inside if given the right invitation.
- Winter beauty. Many facets of winter can be almost magical in the way they play with our senses. The beauty of fresh-fallen snow, especially on the boughs of evergreens; the crisp cold air and the steam of our breath; the crunch of snow and ice underfoot; the clearer night sky with stars so much more twinkly than in summer; and all those holiday decorations scattered about the neighborhood. Even the kitschy ones represent someone's hard work and creative vision.

If you're like me, one of the best reasons to get outside in winter is to fight off some cabin fever. No matter how much we may love our kin, being cooped up inside can get old after a while. Getting outside for a walk around the neighborhood is a great way to work off some cookies, escape whiny relatives, exercise the dog and refresh the mind. And nothing makes the hot chocolate taste better than coming back in from the frigid winter air.