

Four Seasons

by Alison J. Long

Have you ever had to look twice after seeing a plant in full bloom in January? This past winter on a jog through my neighborhood, I did. On somewhat closer inspection, the plant turned out to be a plastic flower. Such an easy-care plant with absolutely no problem coaxing blooms!

But there's a problem, right? Though we gardeners may use built elements as garden art, these pieces are almost always a synthetic contrast to the surrounding plants – not an imitation of them or a replacement for them. And that's the issue.

To me, a large part of the beauty of a successful garden is its ephemeral nature. Selecting plants that play a part in local ecology generally means that they will transform over the growing season. This transformation may be in the form of providing nutrients for our local insects, leaving nibbled leaves behind. Or it could be the classic pattern of spring blooms, lush summer foliage, and vibrant fall color.

On the spectrum of fidelity to nature, I find the Astroturf approach to gardening surely lies at one end of the spectrum – a rejection of ecological participation. Exotic plants play a part to some extent, and lie somewhere in the middle. But, native plants are integral to a healthy ecosystem and provide captivating beauty, changing throughout the growing season and over the years. Here are a few of my favorites that provide multi-season beauty:

Aronia Arbutifolia 'Brilliantissima', Red Chokecherry (#1)

With this plant's tiny footprint of only 3-4 feet, almost any garden can be enhanced by its addition. Red Chokeberry starts the season with delicate, fragrant white flower clusters. Summer months bring lustrous green foliage, turning a deep, glorious red in fall. Abundant clusters of deep red berries appear in September and persist into winter, attracting birds. Though the fruit may look tempting, it has an astringent flavor that is unappealing to wildlife until late winter when food choices become limited. As a specimen, the upright habit provides ample space below for a woodland groundcover and additional interest. Alternatively, take advantage of Chokeberry's colonizing nature for mass planting and stunning display.



Penstemon Digitalis 'Husker Red', Beard Tongue (#2)

This perennial manages to provide interest through the growing season. Beautiful deep burgundy leaves last from spring until fall, providing a crisp contrast for the white flowers that appear atop spikes in early summer. Plant this one for its beauty and for the butterflies and hummingbirds that will come to visit!



Fothergilla Gardenii, Dwarf Fothergilla (#3)

This shrub is the perfect fit for foundation plantings and other tight spots. Compact form (2-5' x 2-5') makes it versatile, and interesting features from spring through fall seal the deal. Unique white, bottle-brush flowers appear in early spring, even before leaves emerge. Summer months bring consistent blue-green foliage that looks fresh even when other plants start to look tattered. As a finale, foliage turns brilliant orange, contrasting with other fall colors in the landscape.



Hydrangea Quercifolia, Oakleaf Hydrangea (#4)

A wonderful shrub for dappled shade, this one blooms in mid-summer when there are few blooms to be had. Large white flower clusters appear in July and gradually fade to pink and tan. In autumn, the foliage turns a pleasing deep red-maroon, persisting into winter. When the foliage drops, a subtle exfoliating cinnamon bark is exposed, offering unique winter interest. A number of different varieties of this species offer a great fit for most gardens

**Leucothoe Fontanesiana 'Rainbow', Drooping Leucothoe (#5)**

One of few native evergreens, this graceful shrub with arching branches is terrific underneath leggy plants and in bank stabilization. New foliage is stunning, emerging a range of colors. The species displays bright green or bronze leaves, while 'Rainbow' sports white, pink, and copper new growth. Clusters of bell-shaped, white flowers appear in late spring contrasting with glossy deep green leaves. In winter, foliage turns a handsome bronze-purple.

Consider your own garden space. Are there locations just begging for a plant that can provide delight and interest throughout the year? Then, seek out plants that integrate with the natural ecosystem, responding to seasonal changes and interacting with wildlife. You can do yourself, your garden, and the local ecology a favor by opting for these lovely natives.

