

Winter Planning

PERSPECTIVE ON THE GARDEN, AND OTHER ESSENTIAL TASKS, IS EASIER IN THE COLD

by LISE FUNDERBURG

FOR THOSE WHO MOURN the end of the gardening season, here's some good news: Plants may go dormant in winter, but people don't have to. In fact, certain landscaping projects are actually better suited to the off-months. To begin with, there's planning. With the perspective that comes from distance — less use and fewer attention-grabbing maintenance chores — you can revisit existing designs and reconsider plant palettes. And with the bones of the garden exposed, you can easily see what's out of balance and where you might want to add in structure or visual texture, whether in the form of plants or hardscaping.

"This is a good time to take a step back," says Judy Kameon, founder of Elysian Landscapes in Los Angeles, "to see what's working or not and make adjustments." Where others scan southern California's winter landscape and see spent flowers and dried-out plants, Kameon sees opportunity. "It's time to give everybody a haircut," she says, which means hard cutbacks to reinvigorate ornamental grasses, salvia, and roses. And because the soil continues to be workable in her region, Kameon plants what she can, even though nursery availability is limited during winter months. "You might not see a lot of immediate growth," she says of the early settlers, "but the plants have time to establish, and so the minute it warms up, the results are phenomenal."

Summer is landscape designer Rosalia Sanni's favorite season, but its sensory riches can mask underlying issues. "There's so much to look at," Sanni says, "the smells, the sounds, the movement of wildlife, butterflies, and water." Once that life and activity fades away, what's left behind is the garden's structure, says Sanni, who works for the Greenwich, Connecticut-based Doyle Herman Design Associates.

"When I'm seeing it in winter, even though it's the bleakest time of year, I can really understand flow and the way the spaces are laid out and connected," Sanni observes. She can also make an immediate assessment of which sightlines to keep clear and which to screen out. In one direction, you may want to borrow the view of a neighbor's 200-year-old stone wall, but in another, there might be a giant water

tower that should be obscured at all times. Sanni has the expertise to look for such things even when trees are leafed out, but it's often much easier for clients to commit a portion of the budget to those issues when the potential eyesore is in plain sight.

In Chicago, Steve Gierke, a senior associate at Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects, uses the weather-bound indoor season to stir creative juices. He reviews garden photos he's taken throughout the year to look at where plant compositions might have fallen out of balance. He ventures out to local botanical gardens and arboretums to see how characteristics like bark texture and habit have turned summer wallflowers into winter stunners. And he catches up on design magazines and seed catalogs that have piled up, taking note of the best plant releases from the previous season. (Since new hybrids occasionally don't have the vigor to come back or hold their bloom color over time, there's a plus in waiting out the debut run.) "If you're researching in winter," Gierke explains, "theoretically, they've already had a year in trial."

Even for homeowners starting from scratch, hiring a designer in winter means you're not competing with such high-season demands as installation supervision. "Any client who has me designing in the winter

has my undivided attention," says Sanni. They also have the benefit of her cabin fever. "In winter, I get the most aspirational and the most inspired because I'm dying for everything to come back to life."

Last winter, many parts of the United States saw freakishly warm temperatures, of which savvy designers and contractors took full advantage. In Connecticut, DHDA dug pools straight through the year, and the Tenafly, New Jersey, firm, Paul Keyes Associates, which offers both planning and contracting services, was able to complete all manner of hardscaping projects without having to compete with clients wanting to be in the garden. "We do a lot of construction in winter," says Paul Keyes. "It's a good time to put in a new patio or brick pavers or a barbecue or walkway, as long as it's not freezing. When it's freezing, you do more damage than good. Plants are mostly

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made of water, so they're more likely to snap or break. It's kind of like breaking an icicle. Even the grass gets damaged."

But even when the ground is frozen, significant horticultural work can be done. In St. Paul, Minnesota, where more than 150 days of the year the temperature drops below 32 degrees, plant ecologist Douglas Owens-Pike takes advantage of weather-slowed growth to eradicate woody invasives.

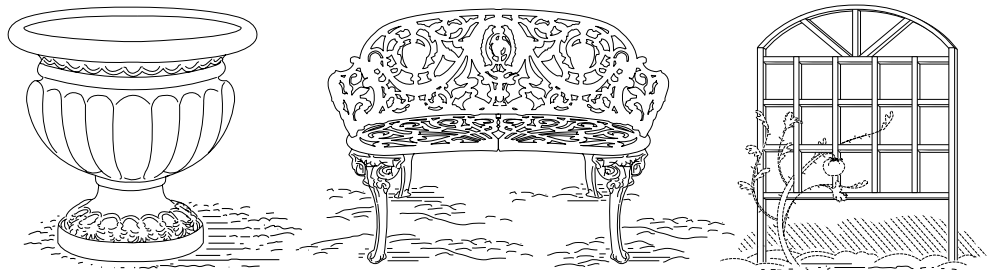
"A big issue here in the upper Midwest is buckthorn," says Owens-Pike, founder of EnergyScapes, which designs landscapes that promote water conservation, low maintenance, and biodiversity. Uncontrolled buckthorn (both common and glossy) can grow 30 feet tall and wide, he says, and will kill forests by growing up under their canopies and outcompeting the native plants for resources. Owens-Pike and his team apply a broad-spectrum herbicide to the imported hedge that has run amok, but the treatment is only effective before April, when the plant's sap starts to rise.

Meadows, too, can be better managed when grasses and annuals have died back, revealing nascent trees overlooked the previous spring. "You'll see all the most beautiful over-story trees," Owens-Pike says of the young interlopers, "oak, cherry, basswood." Right tree, wrong place: Exposed seedlings can be removed either by cutting or herbicide.

Cold-weather season is also the perfect time to relocate larger trees and shrubs, says Keyes, who does his balling, burlaping, and moving after the leaves drop but before the ground freezes. "We do it when the plants are dormant," he says. "It's like a patient under anesthesia; it's a lot less stressful to move the trees at that time."

And then there's major pruning, which Keyes prefers to do when trees are defoliated. "You can really see the architecture of the plant as well as rubbing branches or damaged limbs," he says. "People think the best time is summer, when everything's in full leaf. That's a good time to nip, but not for establishing structure."

One last form of winter planning is to take on all those miscellaneous tasks of upkeep and upgrading. Have lawn furniture cleaned, repaired, and repainted or updated with new upholstery. (New slipcovers, for example, can take six weeks from order to delivery.) Replace the old riding mower or upgrade to a more energy-efficient pool pump. Select and order long-lead items like specialty tiles or outdoor kitchen appliances. Seek permission for work requiring municipal approval, which typically includes fences, construction in historically protected areas, and just about anything that requires digging. Do all this and you'll be ready to break ground — as soon as it thaws. **G**



Great Bone Structure

"Winter is when you go back to the bones of the garden," says Syd Carpenter, a Philadelphia-based sculptor who is also a master gardener. "It's when your hardscaping really shines." Carpenter is talking about all those man-made or man-placed elements that primarily serve as backdrops during the growing season, including walls, fences, arbors, stones, patios, furniture, and containers. In winter, especially in climates where snow reprimed the visual canvas, these will take center stage: A cast-iron settee can reclaim its place as the anchor of a small patio; a latticed trellis can provide both texture and verticality; and a French neoclassical urn can become as much a focal point as the specimen annual it held a few months earlier. This seasonal exposure (not to mention durability) is all the more reason to opt for quality materials. "If you have cheesy pots," Carpenter says, "this is when those bad boys become visible. They're no longer hidden by foliage." For Rosalia Sanni, a designer with the Greenwich, Connecticut-based Doyle Herman Design Associates, well-placed arbors and *allées* establish balance, scale, and flow that shine through even when the rest of the garden is sleeping. "I know if I can make it look fantastic in the winter," Sanni says, "it will look good in every other season." — L.F.

BRENDA WEAVER