

norfolk botanical garden

HORTICULTURE HIGHLIGHTS

Horticultural Highlights - Winter 2025

Hybrid Hellebores – The Winter Garden

Within the past few decades plant breeders have been busy with different *Helleborus* species, crossing them back and forth, looking for something new and different. In our Winter Garden you can see some of the results of this effort with varieties that are reliably evergreen, sterile (will not seed around), bloom earlier, and with upright flowers on sturdy stems you can actually see without having to get down on your knees. Look for 'Cinnamon Snow', 'Mahogany Snow', and 'Joseph Lempler', all of which will be blooming this month.

Bearsfoot Hellebore – Border Garden, Infinity Garden

This plant (*Helleborus foetidus*) also goes by the name of dungwort, reeking hellebore, stinking hellebore, and in fact, *foetidus* means smelly. However, you have to crush the stems and foliage to get the aroma, otherwise it is perfectly respectable. It has quite an unusual flower with celadon green petals edged in burgundy, and the evergreen foliage is handsome as well.

Winterberry Holly – Holly Garden, Discovery Grove

Many hollies are known for their evergreen prickly foliage, but not our native winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*). In the fall the foliage turns a golden yellow before dropping, though the branches are not bare on female plants. They are covered in clusters of bright red, showy fruit which usually persists into January when overwintering birds will make a meal of them.

Coral Bark Japanese Maple – Le Jardin

While most Japanese maples are noted for their spring and fall foliage, this one (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku') is noted for its handsome coral-red stems which become particularly colorful in cold weather. You should see them covered in snow – what a photo op!

'Bihou' Japanese Maple - Hofheimer Camellia Garden

Just like the Coral Bark, 'Bihou' is a Japanese maple noted for its winter bark color. In this case it is a beautiful golden yellow.

Orchids – Tropical Display House

The weather may be cold outside, but it is balmy in our Tropical Display House, and that is just how the plants in there like it, including our exotic orchid collection. At this time of year, they begin their main bloom season, which usually peaks in March. As winter progresses stop by often to see what might be in bloom.

Colorful Conifers – Conifer Garden, Garden-wide

While we have conifers throughout our 175 acres, the best place to see them is in the Conifer Garden. In the winter the foliage of many conifers intensifies in color and you can see rich silvery blues, dusky purples, and golden yellows.

Winter Jasmine – WOW, Holly Garden

Each winter, this plant (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) graces us with bright yellow blooms on evergreen stems. It is a sprawling haystack of a shrub, not for gardeners who like neat and tidy control, but for those that like carefree abandon, no matter the time of year, it is perfect. Thrives in full sun with neglect.

Laurustinus – Border Garden

Covered in masses of dusky pink buds, laurustinus (*Viburnum tinus* 'Compactum') will soon be covered in clusters of small blush white flowers. This evergreen is one of many notable members of the large *Viburnum* family, and it makes a great alternative to some of the more overused foundation shrubs commonly planted.

'Christmas Holiday' Heliconia – Tropical Display House

This tropical plant (*Heliconia vaginalis* 'Christmas Holiday') couldn't have a more apt name. It begins blooming in December and will continue into January with its inflorescences of pure red and white, sitting atop dark green foliage.

'Victory' Pyracantha – Border Garden

Dripping with red-orange fruit, the ungainly pyracantha (*Pyracantha koidzumii* 'Victory') can't decide if it wants to be a shrub or a vine. The birds don't care, they just bid their time waiting for the fruit to ever so slightly ferment. Once it crosses that threshold, then an avian feast begins. Not only do they relish the fruit, but pyracantha makes for good shelter being evergreen and thorny, protecting them from both cold winds and predators.

Butterfly Maze – Butterfly Garden

Our butterfly maze is unusual in that its walls are not made from corn, boxwood, or some other plant typically seen in mazes. It is made from 'Northwind' switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind'). This particular variety of native grass was chosen for its very upright habit, its blue-green summer color, and its ease of growth. Right now, the foliage has changed to its winter color of a handsome tawny brown.

'Townhouse' Crapemyrtle – Matson Garden

Most people associate crapemyrtles with summer, but many of them stand out in the winter landscape with their muscular trunks and handsome bark. One of the best at NBG is the 'Townhouse' crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia fauriei* 'Townhouse') in the Matson Garden. It also happens to be the Virginia State Champion. Without its leaves you can really appreciate its dark chocolate colored bark. If we happen to get any snow this winter to really bring out that color, be sure to come back with your camera for an Instagram-worthy moment.

Sarcandra – The Winter Garden

With its bright orange-red berries and evergreen foliage, *Sarcandra glabra* is a standout in the winter landscape. It is native to Southeast Asia where it has long been used medicinally, and now its healing properties are being investigated by Western medicine. Regardless, it is very pretty.

Fatsia – Infinity Garden, Border Garden, Garden-wide

For gardeners with dense shade and root competition from large trees, it can be hard to find tolerant broadleaf evergreens. However, fatsia (*Fatsia japonica*) can handle it, all while giving your garden a tropical look. Earlier in December they flowered, attracting insect pollinators, and now their handsome green seedheads are gracing the plants. Later these will ripen and turn almost black, providing welcome food for songbirds.

Wildlife Watch – Double-crested cormorants are a common sight in Lake Whitehurst. They primarily eat fish, but also other aquatic organisms. They are very well adapted to coastal life with eyes that allow them to see both above and under the water. In order to dive well, and unlike other birds, their wings have little oil in them lessening buoyancy. This is why you will often see them perched on branches with their wings spread out in the sun to dry.