

# PLANTING FOR WINTER STRUCTURE AND WILDLIFE

Designers and plant experts offer their recommendations to Barbara Segall



CLOCKWISE, FROM  
BOTTOM LEFT:  
*Callicarpa bodinieri*  
'Profusion'; winter garden  
at Cogshall Grange by Tom  
Stuart-Smith FSGD;  
*Viburnum opulus*.

Photographs: GAP Photos/Howard Rice, Richard Bloom, Robert Mabie

In a small to medium-sized garden, structure is likely to be key in autumn and winter. But with the right choice of plant, additional interest from texture, shape, colour and fragrance can be added to the display, providing not only ornament for the garden owner but also shelter, habitat and food late and early in the season for wildlife.

## Naturalism first

Julie Toll FSGD was one of the first garden designers to introduce meadow plantings into domestic gardens and for her, the catalyst has always been nature and what she observes in it. Influenced by her countryside and farming background, Julie's choice for winter structure is based on balance, harmony, seasonal accents and a diverse palette of plants, which are also good for wildlife.

'My first consideration in a small to medium-sized garden is the choice of trees or shrubs. I choose forms that will fill the mid-height canopy layer, and that respond well to pruning to manage their size and shape.'

Among her selection are *Malus transitoria*, with its clouds of white flowers in spring and small yellow fruit in autumn; and hawthorns, particularly *Crataegus x lavallei* 'Carrieri', with white flowers in spring followed by red fruits and foliage that turns from green to red before falling in late autumn. Julie tends to use trees that are multi-stemmed or have umbrella-like shapes. Birds will enjoy the fruits throughout the winter months.

For the mid-layer, she chooses taller shrubs such as *Viburnum opulus* 'Roseum', which responds well to renewal pruning; and medium-height shrubs tolerant of light shade, such as *Skimmia confusa* 'Kew Green', *Hypericum* 'Magical Pumpkin' and *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Goshiki'. For sun-filled plots, lavender, rosemary and hebes are suitable.

For the lower layer, the designer uses herbs such as oregano, mint and lavender, and bulbs in the ground or in containers to offer nectar to pollinators. She also rates hellebores as magnets for insects in early spring. 'You have to be realistic about what you can offer wildlife and still have an attractive structure. But if you focus on a particular aspect, such as early or late nectar, you know you will be able to offer food to pollinators. Hoverflies and ladybirds are among the desirable insects to attract as they predate on aphids.'

**JULIE'S TOP TIP:** 'It's important to keep the soil in good condition so there are plenty of invertebrates working it for you.' [julietoll.co.uk](http://julietoll.co.uk).

**PLANT SOURCES:** for unusual perennials, Beth Chatto's Plants & Gardens, [bethchatto.co.uk](http://bethchatto.co.uk); for larger tree specimens, Deepdale, [deepdale-trees.co.uk](http://deepdale-trees.co.uk).

## Draw them outside

For Juliet Sargeant FSGD FLI, the starting point is the way she wants people to feel in the garden during the winter months. 'It's about encouraging them outside at a time when they would normally hunker down and just look mournfully from the inside out.'

Rather than encouraging owners to stay close to the house with fragrant shrubs, she tends to lay a trail that will draw them further out into the space. She favours plants such as *Elaeagnus x ebbingei*, with its insignificant-looking yet powerfully fragrant flowers. It can be grown as hedging, offering shelter, nutrients and habitat to wildlife, while its fragrance has a good reach.

'When you think about attracting wildlife, berries and fruit come to mind, and *Malus* 'Red Sentinel' – a good tree for a medium-sized garden – is my preferred choice. It holds its fruit over a long period, offering great visual delight in winter as well as food for birds. This is one that needs to be planted in full view as it looks like a festive celebration.'

Juliet also likes to combine grasses such as miscanthus with *Callicarpa bodinieri*'s bright purple berries, both of which will attract wildlife and provide texture and visual impact. *Cornus* 'Midwinter Fire', with its colourful upright branches, is another plant that will entice people out into the garden, and is useful with its bright twiggly tracery for dividing spaces.

Education is at the heart of Juliet's autumn and winter plant choices. 'I feel we need to encourage people to use all their senses in winter, when they are not so overwhelmed by the bright colours of summer.'

Typically, evergreens such as box and yew are regularly used for structure late in the year, but Juliet rarely includes box in her designs now due to its associated problems. 'My substitutes are in the shapely pittosporums such as *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Garnett', *P. 'Golden Ball'* and *P. tobira* 'Nana', all of which respond to light clipping. *Hebe* 'Green Globe' is another evergreen choice with a rounded shape.'

**JULIE'S TOP TIP:** 'I aim to draw clients into the process of creating their gardens so that they make a strong connection between that space and the broader landscape.' Juliet's courses include *Creating All Year Interest in Your Garden and How to Share Your Garden with Wildlife*, [sussexgardenschool.com/garden-courses/](http://sussexgardenschool.com/garden-courses/)

**PLANT SOURCES:** apart from the main sources for large plant material, Juliet tries to support local nurseries for smaller specimens and perennials.

## Shapely evergreens

Kate Gould MSGD makes a point of bringing greenery and wildlife into all of the urban and countryside spaces in which she works. 'I start with →





*Calamagrostis brachytricha* within the *Taxus baccata* hedges that form the Courtyard Garden at Bury Court Gardens, designed by Piet Oudolf and John Coke.

the “lumps” – the big evergreens. Not only do they provide shelter for wildlife, they also offer shelter, privacy and an attractive outlook for the gardener, especially in winter.’

Although evergreens are important, she chooses not to clip closely, preferring more natural shapes to evolve. ‘Formal gardens can be inert and while they may offer structure, they are not particularly attractive to wildlife as habitat or food sources.’

**KATE’S TOP TIP:** ‘If you haven’t got sufficient space in the borders, then garden for wildlife in containers. Shrubs such as *Skimmia* ‘Fragrant Cloud’ will grow well in pots and planters, offering evergreen structure as well as fragrance and attraction for pollinators.’ [kategouldgardens.com](http://kategouldgardens.com).

**PLANT SOURCES:** Deepdale, [deepdale-trees.co.uk](http://deepdale-trees.co.uk); Majestic Trees, [majestictrees.co.uk](http://majestictrees.co.uk); Creepers, [creepersnursery.co.uk](http://creepersnursery.co.uk); Europlants UK, [europlants.net](http://europlants.net); Jacksons Nurseries, [jacksonsnurseries.co.uk](http://jacksonsnurseries.co.uk).

Shrubs and trees with flowers and fruit are her choices for these, offering a ‘balanced diet’ for gardens and wildlife alike. Her choice includes *Viburnum opulus* with its berries in autumn and winter, as well as early-flowering fruit trees such as almond and apricot, which offer nectar to pollinators early in the season.

For the lower storey, Kate focuses on perennials such as agastache, rudbeckia, heleniums and *Verbena bonariensis*, which provide seedheads for birds to feast on in winter, as well as shelter for overwintering insects. Additionally, she leaves any clearance and cutting back until March. ‘Super tidy is not good for wildlife. Shade offers different challenges, but while ferns and hostas may not provide food sources, they do offer cover for toads and hedgehogs.’

#### Perennial favourites

Paul Baines MSGD worked with Beth Chatto between 2004 and 2008, so it is no wonder that the mantra she

held to, of ‘right plant, right place’, is embedded in his planting philosophy, and in his design practice, he seeks to reduce hard landscaping in favour of plants.

Perennials and shrubs are his primary choice for winter interest. *Cornus* ‘Midwinter Fire’ offers good structure and shape, with its colourful stems and seasonal interest, while *Sarcococca confusa*, *Lonicera purpusii* and *Chimonanthus praecox* are among his choices of shrub for winter fragrance.

Similarly, mahonias and *Viburnum bodnantense* offer early fragrance and nectar from their flowers. All are potentially suitable for attracting early-season pollinators and providing shelter and habitat for birds and insects.

**PAUL’S TOP TIP:** ‘Initial preparation when you plant is key, as well as mulching to conserve surface water and suppress weeds.’ [paul-baines.co.uk](http://paul-baines.co.uk).

**PLANT SOURCES:** Howard Nurseries, [howardnurseries.co.uk](http://howardnurseries.co.uk) and Beth Chatto’s Plants & Gardens, [bethchatto.co.uk](http://bethchatto.co.uk), for perennials; Parkers Garden Company, [parkersgardencompany.com](http://parkersgardencompany.com), for trees and shrubs.

Paul encourages his garden owners to leave perennials standing over winter, until early March if possible, so that birds and insects can shelter, pick off seeds and, in the case of insects, hide in their hollow stems. And if there is a winter frost, the flowerheads of sedums (*Hylotelephium*) offer structural interest at a low level, while stems of plants such as perovskia provide a ghostly white element in the winter garden.

Trees that Paul uses in small gardens include *Prunus autumnalis*, *Malus* ‘Red Sentinel’ and witch hazels, as well as pleached hornbeams. Grasses, including calamagrostis and miscanthus, are chosen for their flowing structure and in the low light of autumn and winter, they provide extra ornament. ○

## TIPS FROM A NURSERYMAN

Simon Sutcliffe, Director of How Green Nursery, favours multi-stem trees such as *Amelanchier lamarckii* and *Betula jacquemontii* for seeds, berries and autumn colour. For perennials and grasses, he suggests choosing more unusual versions of a particular plant that might have better structure and stands up well in winter. His suggestions below include *Miscanthus* ‘Ghana’, with its autumn foliage tinged to a burgundy colour; and *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, which he finds more interesting than the upright ‘Karl Foerster’. [howgreennursery.co.uk](http://howgreennursery.co.uk).

#### Herbaceous perennials

- *Verbascum bombyciferum* ‘Arctic Summer’
- *Eupatorium dubium* ‘Little Joe’ or *E maculatum* ‘Phantom’
- *Veronicastrum virginicum* ‘Fascination’
- *Liatrix spicata*
- *Phlomis russeliana*
- *Digitalis ferruginea* ‘Gelber Herold’
- *Agastache* ‘Blue Fortune’
- *Echinacea pallida* or *E. paradoxa*
- *Perovskia* (now known as *Salvia*) ‘Blue Spire’
- *Amsonia tabernaemontana*
- *Ligularia* ‘Britt Marie Crawford’
- *Echinops ritro* ‘Veitch’s Blue’
- *Lunaria annua* ‘Chedglow’
- *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii*
- Any variety of astilbe
- *Foeniculum vulgare* ‘Bronze’
- *Eryngium giganteum* ‘Miss Willmott’s Ghost’ or *E. yuccifolium*
- *Nigella damascena*
- Sedum

#### Grasses

- *Miscanthus* ‘Ghana’
- *Calamagrostis brachytricha*