

welcome the winter garden

NEVER DID AGREE with the sages who found gardens beautiful in the winter. I just couldn't see it. Bones? They aren't meant to be seen; they are intended as scaffolding, the structure that holds and shapes the fleshy, flowery bits. No one wants to see a skeletal garden, much less one malnourished and shivering in the dead of winter. I look down from my bedroom window every morning at a gray ribbon of what, just a month ago, was a grassy path, at moldering mounds of what was a bed of sedum, at the ghostly, frayed remains of what were

the proud curls of hosta, and I see only a place that makes me wistful, as when the baby is sleeping and (though a sleeping baby is a beautiful sight) you are left at the threshold, waiting, watching, wondering at the miracle that he will wake the next morning.

Winter in the garden has always been something to wait and wonder through. Sure, I could wax poetic about the grooved trunks of sassafras freed of leafy garb, ranked starkly across the front, or the ledge of granite whose edge is no longer softened by masses of daylilies. Don't worry, I won't. I have finally discovered where the real beauty of the winter garden lies.

The nursery catalogs began to arrive, in gigantic drifts, instead of the snow we no longer have, round about midwinter. The catalogs used to be where I found winter beauty, things to curl up with, indulging in long, languid fantasies of what the garden might look, feel, and smell like next June. Well, someone's garden. But the full-color, glossy-leaved catalogs have somehow, on the way to being so professional, managed to lose their romance. Never mind the writing; no one bothers to wax poetic, to say nothing of thoughtful, silly, or loving, anymore. Even good old Amos Pettingill seems to be taking a long, very long, vacation. The chorus from the catalogs is loud and brassy. Everything seems to have been written by the marketing department—and everyone seems to be using the same marketing department.

All catalog offerings are now super, gigantic, beefy, hardy, choice—and more expensive than ever before. They make you think that the point of gardening is showing off. Conspicuous consumption has hit the ground running, it would seem from the proliferation in my mailbox. What happened to discretion? Or elegance, sweetness, or usefulness? There was once, in a garden, world enough, and time, for coyness. Today the tulips are absolutely reliable. Reliable? Since when was that what you were looking for in the garden? That's what florists are for. Gardens are for mystery, and for

surprise, and, yes, for heartbreak when that petulant bulb defies expectation and does not show up one year—and, rather like the ditz who misread the date on the invitation, shows up with ten of her friends a year later. And what about this trend for flowers that look like other flowers rather than themselves? Daffodils that look like hibiscus. Tulips that look like peonies. Lilies that look like pansies. Irises that look like flamingos. Cross-dressing is one thing among people. Let's leave the plants alone. (Hey! Anyone care to disagree about the garden catalogs? Send me your candidates for good reads that kindle anything more complex than lust, or disgust, and I'll review those gleefully.)

No, the midwinter garden beauty I have found is in old books. Happily for the gardeners who love the complications and uncertainty and mystery and magic of gardening, there has never been a better time to share the pleasure with the writers of another generation. We are in the midst of a rampant proliferation of reissues of the books of our gardening forebears. The man I want by my side at all times this winter is Beverley Nichols, who wrote a trilogy about his house and garden, Merry Hall, in the '50s, now republished by Timber Press. I am indebted to him for many nights of laughter. This spring will see the reissue of *The Gardener's Bed-Book* (Modern Library), written in 1929 by another of my favorite gardeners, Richardson Wright, who was the editor of this magazine for 35 years. Another favorite in the Modern Library series is Eleanor Perenyi.

The "real" garden season will be upon us soon enough, and there will again come a short, happy time to get dirt under our nails. But as anyone who has ever had an encounter with an unreliable bulb (and who hasn't?) can tell you, the enchantment of gardening lives most vividly in our imaginations. The garden really is infinitely beautiful in winter.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Dom Browning'.

Dominique Browning, EDITOR