

Filling in the Woodland Gaps

Little attention is being paid to the winter blooming hellebores now that brilliant spring color has claimed our interest, but spring is the time for dividing them if you have plenty in your woodland garden or, if you don't, this is the time to plant more. It would be wiser to add rather than divide these gems since hellebores dislike being moved and might sulk for a season or two before flowering again. This is not a handicap since the foliage itself is so handsome.

You may have been waiting for shade-loving *Helleborus* to become so popular that the price would plummet. That may never happen, but it is worth every penny to have critter proof flowers to brighten dull winter months. The two most widely grown species are *H. niger*, the Christmas rose, blooming from early winter to early spring and *H. orientalis*, the Lenten rose, in flower from midwinter to midspring.

Both species prefer neutral to alkaline soil in dappled shade. If your soil is strongly acidic a little lime may be added when you plant them. In purchasing seedlings the colors may not be predictable but will be lovely, soft greens and white with burgundy blushes. Selective breeding has produced a 'Lady' strain with more saturated colors such as the Red Lady strain and a long awaited yellow hellebore is said to be available. It is called 'Golden Sunrise' and the canary yellow flowers are red-veined.

If you prefer gentler colors at the fringes of a woodland, you may find your choice of plants to be out of fashion. In landscaping it is the bold colors that bring the edges toward you: the pastel shades add distance. *Weigela*, for example, doesn't appear frequently but it is an old standby for a woodland landscape. It is an upright deciduous shrub happy in sun or part shade. Small green leaves with showy funnel-shaped flowers in late spring and summer make it a good 'bridge' plant. Humming birds love it! *W. florida* 'variegata' has leaves edged in white and *W. looymansii* 'aurea' sports arching shoots and golden leaves. There is a *Weigela* for smaller spaces: *W.* 'Rumba' is a 3' x 3' spreading shrub with purple edged yellow/green leaves and bell-shaped dark red flowers that bloom from early summer to early autumn. *W.* 'Samba' is another small plant with dark green leaves and yellow-throated red blooms: *W.* 'Tango' is a two foot edition of 'Samba'.

Perfect in a woodland setting is the native Coast Azalea, *Rhododendron atlanticum*, a suckering deciduous plant with oblong/obovate blue-green leaves. It blooms in trusses of 4 to 13 funnel-shaped, very fragrant pale pink flowers that bloom before the leaves arrive. You can find this charmer at Niche Gardens in Chapel Hill, N.C. (www.nichegardens.com) Niche has several deciduous natives that they advise planting in morning sun in rich acidic soil.

Not often seen but good for the shrub border or woodland garden is the deciduous Paper Bush or *Edgeworthia chrysantha*, syn. *E. papyrifera*. It has 6" long slim leaves of dark green and grows to 5' wide and tall in zones 8-10. It would probably do

well here in a sheltered spot. The clustered flowers that bloom in winter are pale yellow and white velvety tubes with a fine fragrance.

ENVIRONMENTAL UPDATE: An article in the journal 'Conservation Biology' reports on a study showing the effort to supply fuel from a biofuels plantation is a bad idea. Like the misbegotten effort to create fuel from corn, the planting of biofuels where trees once grew has been a no-win situation. The study estimated that it would take at least 75 years for the carbon emissions saved by the use of soy or palm oils to compensate for the carbon emissions created in the process of turning forest into land suitable for growing these crops.

Forests sequester vast amounts of CO₂ but cutting them down releases this global warming gas. The study concluded that keeping forests intact is a lot more helpful in lessening climate change than replacing them with fuel crops. Another necessity often overlooked is the biodiversity essential to a healthy habitat that is threatened by the introduction of a monoculture. It is a hard-to-face fact that the same places that harbor tropical forests are the places where a crop like palm oil also flourishes.

In his book, "Hot, Flat, and Crowded", Thomas L. Friedman states "...deforestation accounts for some 20 percent of all CO₂ emissions...the CO₂ emissions from deforestation are greater than the emissions from the world's entire transportation sector- all the cars, trucks, planes, trains, and ships combined." For all our sakes, go hug a tree!