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## A BLOSSOM WALK: FIRST BLOOMS OF SPRING

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Winter is my favorite season of the year. To me, it's not barren and cold. It's filled with expectancy and hope. Tree branches are bare of leaves but the buds are fat with life.

The hills are green with winter grasses and the first wildflowers begin to appear along the roadsides. Thousands of wintering birds gorge on seeds in pastureland and rice fields; then rise up in noisy masses when disturbed. I love this season.

Although we have a mindset that winter means snowmen, icicles, and hot cocoa, winter in Northern California is actually a rich season for blossoms and color. A gardener just needs to pull on a sweater and warm hat and take a walk out into the garden to see the show.

In the midst of winter, as fierce storms blow across the landscape, Poet's **Narcissus** or Jonquil bulbs (*Narcissus poeticus*) are among the first blooms of the cold season. The sweetly scented flowers often mark old homestead sites and are a welcome addition to a modern garden as well.

I have some growing by my door and love the way the scent welcomes my homecoming after a day in town. These are best planted in the fall, but nurseries often have a few packages of bulbs leftover and it is perfectly fine to plant them now. They'll bloom a little late this year, but be back on their welcoming schedule next year.

If you receive a gift of Paperwhite Narcissus (*Narcissus papyraceus*) in a dish (these are a variation of the same bulb), plant these bulbs outside after you've enjoyed their lovely flowers, and they will flourish for years to come. Other early bulbs include Snowflakes (*Leucojum aestivum*), Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*), and some early Daffodils (*Narcissus sp.*). All have blossoms during the winter. Yellow daffodils generally flower earlier than fancy ones.

Also in full bloom throughout the season are **camellias**. I love the way that pink camellia blossoms look in swirling fog!

The **Sasanqua Camellias** start in fall and depending on variety, bloom through the winter. "Yuletide" is a favorite late Sasanqua variety that blooms in the midst of winter and has red single blossoms with yellow stamens, set against rich green foliage. It takes considerable sun.

The **Japonica Camellias** begin blooming just about the time the Sasanquas begin to taper off. There are many varieties and gardeners will want cultivars labeled "early" or "midseason" for winter bloom, or go to a nursery on a winter day and pick those varieties that are blossoming at the time desired. A few winter blooming cultivars include "Alba Plena," "Daikagura," "Debutante," "Elegans," and "Tom Knudsen." Japonica camellias are best grown out of strong sun. All camellias have attractive foliage when not in bloom and look attractive year round.

Another favorite winter bloomer is the **Daphne** (*Daphne odora*) with its legendary fragrance. The most commonly available variety has lovely variegated leaves as well.

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This plant prefers some protection from hot sun during the mid-day hours but is not a fussy plant and likes only a moderate amount of water, in well drained soil. Too much pampering may kill it!

Other winter blooming shrubs include the evergreen Springtime **Viburnum** (*Viburnum tinus* 'Springtime' or 'Compacta') which blooms from fall through the winter and has nice looking foliage the rest of the year.

**Rosemary** is another winter bloomer with vivid blue flowers that attract bees. **Kerria** (*Kerria japonica*) has striking yellow blossoms set upon bare bright green stems in late winter. Gardeners seeking winter blooms will want to seek out the older, single flowered Kerria because it blooms earlier than the more common double flowered Kerria.

Towards the end of the season, almost into spring, are the blossoms of the **Flowering Quince** (*Chaenomeles sp.*). This plant has fat buds that can be brought in the house to bloom as early as January in some places. The buds on garden shrubs will explode into bloom on bare branches in the late winter and are a harbinger that spring is nearly arrived.

Many plants are lacking in blossoms but have vividly colored bark or interesting stems that are visible during the winter.

**Red Twig Dogwood** (*Cornus stolonifera*) and "Coral Bark" **Japanese Maples** (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango Kaku,' 'Beni Kawa,' 'Fjeillheim,' 'Winter Flame,' and others), have striking red stems throughout the winter.

And there are many plants with twisty branches that add interest during the season, including Harry Lauder's **Walking Stick** (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') and Lavender Twist **Redbud** (*Cercis Canadensis* 'Covey'). These shrubs and trees have been cultivated specifically for their unique winter appearance and are striking specimen plants in a winter garden.

A trip to the nursery will also reveal winter annuals to brighten flowerbeds and provide colorful accents in pots. These include calendulas, snapdragons, primrose, poppies, pansies, and violas. This is not a complete list, there are dozens of selections in a prism of colors.

Many of these are quite easy to grow from seed if started in the fall, however germination can be low in cold soils so gardeners are usually advised to start with young plants from the nursery during the winter.

I like to have pots of these colorful annuals to brighten my day as I walk out my front door and glory in my favorite season.

Yes, winter is my favorite season. Open that door, enjoy the crisp cold air on your face, and venture forth on a garden exploration. You too will find dozens of plants blooming during the blustery cold winter days. Winter may become your favorite season too!

### References

*Sunset Western Garden Book.*

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