

Winter's colors

Sara Malone's Petaluma garden shows amazing color every season, but especially winter when others are dormant

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT*

Published: Friday, January 7, 2011 at 3:00 a.m.

If the winter landscape evokes images of leafless trees and half-empty beds where perennials once bloomed, you haven't seen Sara Malone's Petaluma garden.

Featured last spring on the Master Gardener Bloomin' Backyards tour, the Malone garden stunned visitors with its diverse palette of texture and color. Yet in winter, the scene here takes on a painterly aura nearly beyond imagination.

Green tones abound, but subtle blues interspersed with bright and burnished shades of yellow, gold and red flow in melodious harmony throughout extensive grounds stretching around the home Sara shares with husband Ron and onto the landscape of their Circle Oak ranch, a private equine rehabilitation facility in east Petaluma.

For most of the 20 years the Malones have lived on their ranch, Sara focused on garden spaces surrounding the house and leading to outbuildings. An adjacent hillside, about an acre and a half, she left untouched.

"Such a large space was daunting," she says. "We considered planting olives or grapes, but decided to take a piecemeal approach and eventually re-sculpted the slope. Ron likes to help with the ranch equipment, and he created the pathways I



BETH SCHLANKER / The Press Democrat
Sara Malone's garden shows off a lot of color, even in winter.

laid out.”

Planting began with a greenhouse, a gift from Ron presented at Sara's retirement from a career in the financial industry. She positioned it prominently at the top of the rise with a vine-covered folly (an ornamental structure) nearby, soon filled it with plants, and a design for the slope began to evolve.

The ensuing garden dedicated largely to conifers has become the highlight among many hundreds of plants on the property. Success lies in the interplay of diverse forms and handsome foliage. The collection is filled with intense hues that rival any floral border in any season. In winter, it positively glows.

“Light in winter is so pleasing,” Malone says, “not harsh in any way. Cold air brings out a tinge of bronze, sometimes pinkish tints and certain plants reach their peak of color.”

It doesn't take a sunny day for the garden to shine, not with the abundance of brilliant foliage that bedecks so many trees and shrubs less than three years after planting. Already this area has become a sumptuous display with riveting combinations of extraordinary color and texture.

The conifer garden seems to have sprung up all at once, but Sara previously had propagated many plants and systematically collected others from local sources such as Emerisa Gardens and Urban Tree Farm in Santa Rosa and Robert Peacock Nursery near Sebastopol. Pond and Garden in Cotati has proven invaluable for many Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) and specialty conifers.

If there's a secret to Malone's success, it's her talent for finding unusual species and a deft hand in creating sizzling partnerships among them, a skill she acknowledges came through years of trial, error and persistence with a goal of low maintenance among plants as attractive in winter as at any other time of year.

To ensure that the garden appears as stunning in January as it does in June, Malone selects the majority of her plants for their multiple seasons of interest. Seductive, colorful evergreen foliage nearly always wins out over showy ephemeral flowers or one-season color.

“I'm careful with deciduous species,” she explains. “I love snowball viburnum blossoms in spring and its foliage in fall, and the deep burgundy and purple of *Cotinus Grace* and *Royal Purple* — I have eight of them — in three seasons, but I don't want a lot of deciduous color that quickly fades because I'd rather have winter

interest.”

Still, a plethora of deep autumn tones strikes a seasonal note, then melds in voluptuous harmony with the winter landscape. Some plants remain fully decked out for several months from October onward, such as the flowering crabapple (Malus) Professor Sprenger, which holds its yellow leaves and a copious crop of orange-red fruits through December.

Malone gives credit to grandparents and parents for her gift for gardening developed early on; she cultivated her own wildflower garden at the age of 9. But despite this natural talent, she's enlisted the aid of Jani Weaver of Garden Weaver Design, a specialist in conifers and maples.

“Jani is my muse and my conscience,” Malone admits. “I ask her questions and we share ideas. She's been a big help and keeps reminding me to ‘keep it simple’ and not use too many different plants. It's more fun to run an idea past somebody than to work alone and risk making mistakes. We fill dual roles — artist and engineer — and work mostly in winter, which has had an influence on our plant selection. I think one reason people tend to plant so many spring bloomers is that they shop in nurseries in spring when their gardening drive is rejuvenated.”

Despite Weaver's influence, Malone's garden is intensely personal. She revels in the magical qualities that greet her as she walks the pathways with her dog early every morning. She never fails to pause and take in a particular rippling flow of color.

“Look how that solid blue, almost turquoise, stands out against deep green Emerald Carpet manzanita,” Malone says as she points out the dwarf conifer *Cedrus deodara* Prostrate Beauty positioned among a sweep of groundcovers. “The butterscotch, coral, and lilac tints on Juniper Lime Glow transform it completely in winter and lead right through the manzanita to the golden yellow and burnished orange of dwarf *Abelia* Kaleidoscope!”

Unlike other junipers, compact, foot-tall Lime Glow puts on a pale variegated winter coat over soft, feathery needles and transforms itself completely for several months.

One of the most spectacular points of light among the conifers emanates from a striking form of Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa* *Citriodora*), a perfectly balanced, conical tree that will eventually reach about 30 feet tall.

“It's positively a beacon in winter,” says Malone. “I see it in the morning when I

first look out the bedroom window.”

Perched along the border of the new hillside garden and backlit by the sun, the cypress presents a spectacular beginning to the day. Set among deeper greens, it's balanced by a judicious selection of other evergreens that also radiate citron brilliance, such as a luminous western arborvitae (*Thuja plicata* Sunshine) and the strappy arching leaves of Golden Ray phormiums.

Although foliage in the conifer garden is the stand-out winter feature, Malone has been careful to include other points of interest in a rainbow of hues throughout every planted bed. Reds appear on stems and twigs of shrubby *Drimys lanceolata* and the barberry *Berberis wilsonii* and on evergreen leaves of *Berberis Red Jewel*; burgundy, on evergreen hopseed bush (*Dodonaea*), *Loropetalum Red Dragon*, and sword-shaped *Phormium Dusky* chief; and mahogany bark shows on strawberry tree *Arbutus Marina* and bushier *A. unedo*.

Most prominent is the coral-red bark of two Sango Kaku Japanese maples whose name translates as “coral tower.” Their vibrant branches live up to their calling as they turn on their fieriest tints in winter and never fail to elicit attention among lesser lights.

Harlequin-like leaves of shrubby *Leucadendron Jester*, a South African silver tree, transforms this cultivar into a showpiece as branch tips turn festive cherry red.

“To me,” says Malone, “it looks like it's wearing lipstick. In summer, leaves are more greenish yellow, but as they redden in winter, the shrub becomes a drama queen.”

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