

# Profiles in Green

Some deciduous trees, shrubs, and vines remain verdant year-round

Cynthia Gillis

WHEREVER THERE'S a true winter—a bleak time when virtually nothing grows—gardeners seem to long for the sight of something green, something obviously alive and healthy to help sustain them until spring. All too often, this sort of longing results in the planting of numerous evergreens. It is true that evergreens provide winter inter-

est, but because they do not change much from season to season, I find that they quickly lose *all* interest.

That's why I'm so fond of the deciduous trees and shrubs whose stems, branches, or bark remain green all year. They bring a touch of fresh, hopeful color to the winter landscape and, as they leaf out and flower, offer interest in other sea-

sons as well. In addition, many of these plants will survive in harsh, windswept locations such as hilltops or city terraces, where desiccating winter winds make it almost impossible for even the hardiest conifers to survive.

Over the years I've come to rely on a number of these deciduous evergreens. Each of them is suited to a range of cli-



*Cornus sericea*



mate zones, but some are of course more hardy than others. The hardiest among them are *Cornus sericea* and its cultivars, a group of shrubby, multistemmed dogwoods. Most of these have red stems, but in the case of 'Flaviramea' the stems are a bright greenish yellow, almost chartreuse, depending on the time of year and the way the light hits them. They start the winter green, then gradually become more yellow by spring. A less common cultivar, 'Nitida', has stems that remain a pleasant pea-soup green throughout the winter months.

I think *C. sericea* looks best when planted in fairly large masses, which is the way it grows naturally from northern Canada to Virginia (USDA Zones 2 through 8). If planted in full sun in the moist, almost swampy conditions it prefers, it will grow rapidly, reaching

about seven feet in height and perhaps a little more in width in a couple of years. The effect is loosely vertical, a corps de baller of slender branches reaching eagerly for the sky. If planted at the top of a rise—or anywhere that you can see it backlit—the stems will glow astonishingly against the pale-blue winter sky. Like several of the other green-stemmed plants I will describe here, the dogwood's youngest stems are the most vividly colored, so every other year or so in early spring I cut the oldest ones back to the ground to encourage bright new growth.

Another particularly hardy green-stemmed plant is the winged euonymus, or burning bush (*Euonymus alata*), which many gardeners plant solely for the scarlet color of its fall foliage. But I also admire the lovely color of its branches in winter. When young, these are a smooth, soft

green. As they grow older, "wings" appear—long, craggy, irregular ridges of pale, tan, corky bark that run the length of each branch. The combination of the pure-green youthful branches and the tan-striped mature ones creates a rich, olive-green effect.

Winged euonymus grows to about 10 feet and is broader than it is high. Its wide-spreading habit and the tendency of its branches to fan out horizontally give it a rounded silhouette similar in shape to a mound of snow. Its habit and its elegant, deep-green leaves make this euonymus useful as a specimen shrub or as an unobtrusive background plant. You can use it as a hedge or prune it as a small tree. A mass planting at the curve of a driveway makes a stately welcome. This plant is hardy in Zones 3 through 8, grows in situations ranging from full sun to fairly





deep shade, and will do fine in any moisture-retentive soil as long as it doesn't get waterlogged.

Broom is a deciduous shrub that is often mistaken for a true evergreen. Its leaves are so small and sparse, its grass-green stems so fine and dense, that it is easy to understand the confusion. Broom makes a soft, delicate member of a shrub border, its bright, slender stems contrasting with those of coarser shrubs, such as the somber leatherleaf viburnum (*Viburnum rhytidophyllum*). It also can be used to edge or frame a perennial border, or act as an informal hedge.

Warminster broom (*Cytisus xpraecox*), Scotch broom (*C. scoparius*), and dyer's broom (*Genista tinctoria*) are the most commonly available. Warminster broom is the most massive of the three, reaching about 10 feet to the Scotch broom's six feet and the dyer's broom's ground-hugging two to three. All are graceful, fine-textured shrubs that offer a brief, brilliant profusion of fragrant yellow flowers in

mid-spring. Scotch broom cultivars with flowers ranging from pink to rose to purple are also available.

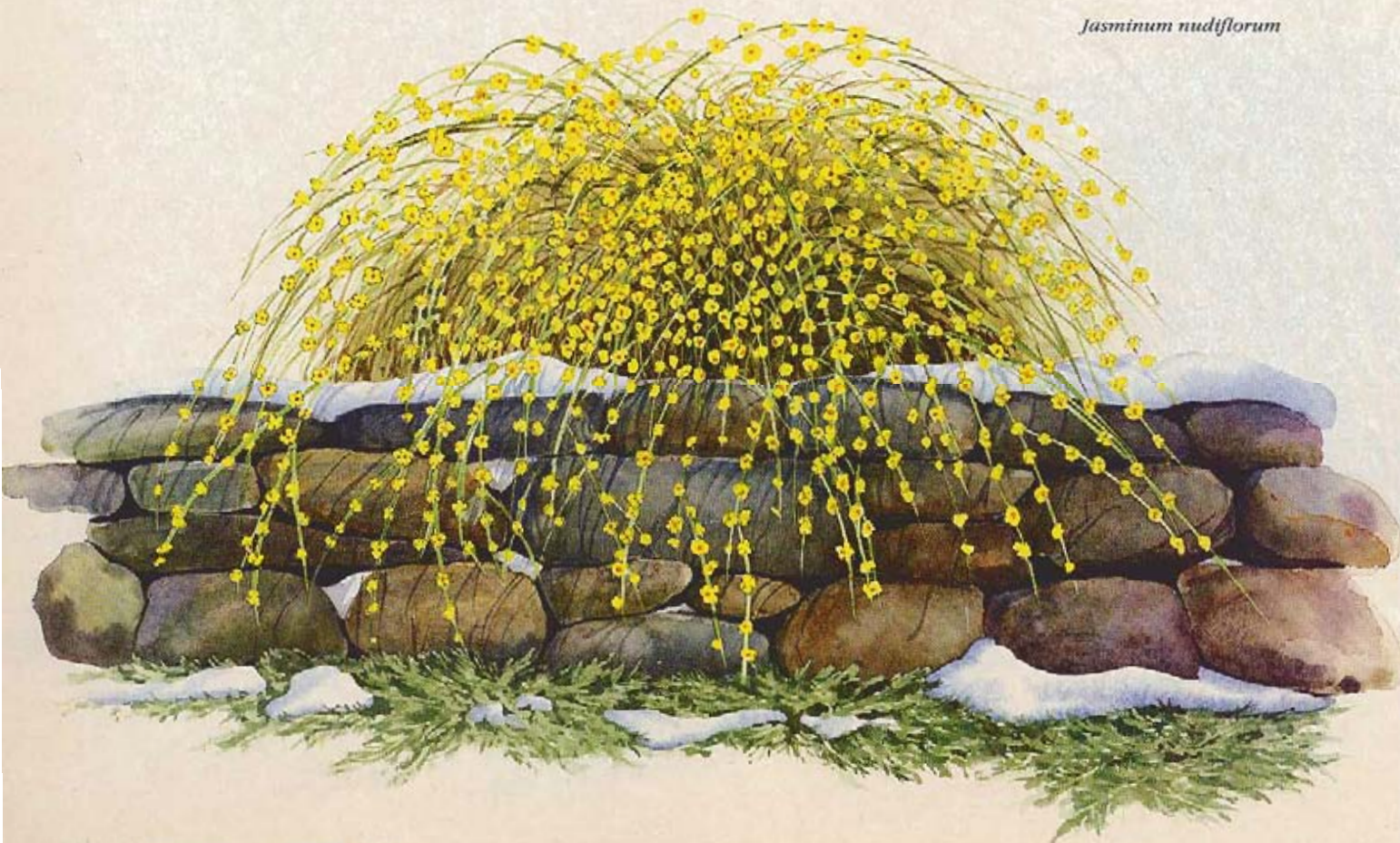
All three brooms are hardy in Zones 5 through 8, with the exception of the dyer's broom, which is able to succeed as far north as Zone 3. They do best in full sun and sandy, rather dry soil. In my Zone 7 garden heavy snow sometimes bends the branches so that the tips touch the ground. It makes a lovely sight, and the stems are so flexible that they soon spring back to their normal upright position. In exposed sites along the coast, however, some branches may die back over the winter.

**T**O ME, ONE OF THE MOST disheartening sights of winter is a bare, gray stone wall against a gray winter sky. This is where winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) quietly shines, with its smooth, bright-green stems trailing over the stone's rough surface. This exuberant shrub is exceptionally adaptable and fast

growing; a single plant quickly forms a tangle of slender stems in a mound about three feet high and 10 feet across. If it isn't controlled it can become a weed, but it is a welcome sight in the dead of winter, particularly in late winter, when brilliant-yellow flowers appear on the otherwise naked stems. Winter jasmine often blooms for many weeks, but because the blooms are sparse, the effect remains predominantly green. It does quite well in poor, dry soil and can take some shade, though it flowers better in full sun. It is hardy in Zones 6 through 10.

A shrub that provides a fairly dense screen even in winter is *Koeria japonica*. Its bright-green stems grow straight up, then arch gracefully to form a rounded, twiggy mass about six feet high. In my front yard, I have grouped three plants of *K. japonica* 'Pleniflora', a double-flowering cultivar that my neighbor has dubbed the "marigold bush" because of the color and shape of its blossoms. Here it flowers twice, once for about three weeks in the

*Jasminum nudiflorum*





spring, creating a fountain of gold, then again more sparingly in the late summer and fall.

*Kerria japonica* is hardy in Zones 5 through 9. It requires good drainage, especially in colder climates, but is otherwise an undemanding plant. It prefers some shade, doing well even in full shade, but also can withstand considerable sun. Like *Cornus sericea*, its newer branches are brighter green and more attractive, so cut out the oldest ones each spring after the plant flowers.

Trifoliolate or hardy orange (*Poncirus trifoliata*) is rarely seen outside of the Deep South, where it is often planted as a barrier hedge. While it is more tender than the green-stemmed shrubs mentioned above, it grows well as far north as Zone 6 and should be used more often. In winter every part of this small, low-branched tree—from the trunk to the branches to the vicious, two-inch thorns—seems to have been spray-painted a bright, even, glossy green. The overall effect is angular and unexpectedly lacy, especially when backlit by a low winter sun.

Fragrant white flowers in spring and perfect balls of yellow-orange fruit (also fragrant, but too bitter to eat) give year-round interest, though the plant flowers and fruits better in the more southerly zones. As a barrier, it is at least as effective as barbed wire and certainly more attractive. It also makes a fine summer background for other flowers and shrubs. Because it is fairly wind-resistant, I'd like to see it used on more city terraces.

Another tree to plant for winter interest is the golden chain tree (*Laburnum xwatereri*). This vase-shaped plant with a distinctive flat top is usually grown for its one spectacular week of bloom in May, when long, drooping clusters of yellow, wisterialike flowers seem to pour from its branches. For the rest of the year it is less showy but no less valuable. Its smooth bark is a pale olive-green that accents the tree's natural elegance and doesn't darken with age.

If you plant the golden chain tree in groups of three to form a small grove, the green effect of the bark is intensified. I have such a group planted in front of some low, spreading Japanese yews (*Taxus cuspidata*). In winter the yews' deep, almost black foliage highlights the trees' soft-green trunks; in spring, the yews' creamy-green new growth lends a sunlit quality to the green-on-green texture of the laburnums' leaves and branches. The tree is also beautiful combined with the variegated dragon's-eye pine (*Pinus densiflora* 'Oculus-draconis'). The texture of the pine's long, fine, cream-and-green banded

needles works well year-round with the color and texture of the laburnum.

*Laburnum xwatereri* isn't cold hardy enough for the Far North and can suffer sunburn in the Deep South, but in its range (Zones 5 through 7) it grows well in full sun to light shade. Moist, well-drained soil helps this lovely tree withstand the twig blight that sometimes affects it.

Although technically none of these plants are evergreens, their effect is "ever

green" and most give the added bonus of flowers. And because they are hardy in a range of climate zones, no gardener should have to endure another winter without the heartening touch of color they provide. ❧

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Landscape designer Cynthia Gillis gardens in Brooklyn, New York.

For sources of plants mentioned in this article, see page 64.



*Laburnum xwatereri*