

Winter Interest in the Native Landscape

Too often, landscape designers default to conifers and broadleaf evergreens for winter interest. Unfortunately, this results in an overabundance of a few overused groups of plants that typically are out of place in the Midwest. Native plants can provide winter interest in the form of dried grasses, persistent stalks and inflorescences, and seeds that attract birds.

Several native grasses have excellent winter interest including Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) and Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*). Little Bluestem is perhaps the best native grass for winter interest since it is very resistant to lodging once the stalks have dried. Its bright red fall foliage fades to reddish brown for the winter, providing great contrast to the snow. Prairie Dropseed takes on a very different look in the winter. The yellow and orange fall color fades to tan and drapes over the crown the plant, forming interesting mopheads in the landscape. Switchgrass is already popular in the ornamental landscape with a myriad of cultivars available that vary in height, erectness and foliage color.

The dried inflorescences of many forbs also provide excellent winter interest. In some cases, this interest is primarily in late fall and early winter as they tend to disintegrate with time and weather. Prairie forb genera such as Echinacea, Eryngium, Liatris, Parthenium, Baptisia, Pycnanthemum, and Monarda all provide interesting inflorescence or culm structure in the winter landscape.

A dynamic landscape is an interesting landscape. Little Bluestem waving in the winter winds is one way to achieve this dynamism. Another method results from attracting wildlife to the planting to consume the wildflowers seeds. Cardinals, goldfinches, native sparrows and juncos all flock to native forbs in the winter to consume their nutritious seeds, creating an active, living landscape.

Plant Feature – Dense Blazing Star (*Liatriis spicata*)

This native of sedge meadows and wet mesic prairies is frequently cultivated as a garden perennial for its many excellent attributes. The showy elongated purple inflorescence attracts numerous butterflies and other pollinators during its bloom period in July and August. Later, the ripe seeds are favored by songbirds such as goldfinches and juncos in the fall and winter. Dense Blazing Star is easily cultivated in moist to mesic soils in full sun. It typically grows 3 to 5 feet in height. Like all blazing stars, the flowers first open at the top of the spike and work down the inflorescence as the flower season progresses.



In cultivation, Dense Blazing Star is excellent for rain gardens, butterfly gardens, and perennial borders where it mixes well with other showy prairie wildflowers. In a restoration, it should be used with associates from our [Sedge Meadow Mix](#) or our [Wet Mesic Prairie Mix](#).