

## Searching for Inspiration

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It is the morning of December 11. I feel like a prisoner trying to find some inspiration to release myself from the obligation to get this newsletter done. Fortunately, I found it.

I found it in the morning hoar frost transforming the landscape of Curtis Prairie and Longnecker Gardens, as well as the thin sheet of ice which has formed across the surface of Lake Wingra for the first time this season, flocks of seagulls tippy-toeing across its surface.

I found it in the hundreds of Canadian geese flying overhead, only broken by the near apparition of three large flocks of sandhill cranes flying in tandem and whooping their way to the south.

I found it in the garden, whose lightly frozen soil crunches under foot, as I observe the first tufted tit mouse I have seen on the feeder in more than 15 years. Six frosty pillows of *Tsuga canadensis* 'Gentsch white' are the focal point in the magical low intensity light of early winter. At no other time of the year are they more eye catching.

Necklaces of epimediums lead off down the paths. The coppery-bronze foliage of *Epimedium rubrum* is the most ornamental, in sharp contrast to the deep purple foliage of *Epimedium X versicolor* 'neo-sulphureum'. But my favorite, lacing the feet of the hemlocks is the still highly glossed green foliage of *Epimedium X perralchicum* 'Frohnleiten'. I think back to that early November night when I picked up Darrell Probst flying in from Boston for the Great Shady Gardens Symposium, my epimedium and tricyrtis hero. After a late dinner I showed him his room and assumed that he would be off to bed. Wrong! At 11:15 PM (12:15 AM Eastern time) Darrell appeared on the stairs and announced he was ready to tour the garden. Out we go, like two kids in a darkened candy shop trying to find the chocolate covered peanuts. Even the dog shakes her head in disbelief. I was amazed at his ability to identify epimediums in the dark from three or more feet away. It was Darrell who positively identified E. 'Frohnleiten' for me after all these years.

My attention is caught by the pale, tawny clumps of *Habenochloa macra* in perpetual motion in a brisk southwesterly breeze. Fortunately I started a half dozen new clumps around the garden this past spring for just this kind of moment. No other ornamental grass seems capable of making this winter show under the large white oaks in a Wisconsin garden.

The *Hydrangea petiolaris* throws out its lateral branches adorned at the tips with the large frost covered dried florets, dressing the trunk of a white oak in a most beautiful fashion. I cannot help but imagine this display continuing up its full 50-foot length in years to come.

Nearby the white striped bark of *Acer pennsylvanicum* stands out in the December sunshine. I marvel at this year's growth on this woody plant which is now as deep as the blood red of our native dogwoods.

Other outstanding late winter foliage delights the eye. Of all the ferns, any of the members of the genus *Dryopteris* look resplendent, maintaining their upright habitus and green foliage long after other ferns have collapsed into the dried leaf cover. Clumps of the golden feverfew (*Chrysanthemum parthenium* 'Aureum') still glow like jewel islands in a sea of the deep green-purplish foliage of *Ajuga reptans* 'Jungle beauty'. Large plants of *Corydalis ochroleuca* remain covered with green tinged white flowers, and *Corydalis cheilanthifolia*'s finely cut foliage never looks more bronzed that at this time of year.

A. Hort Hound