Four Fragrant, Winter-blooming Woodland Shrubs

As we move into winter, and the fall color has disappeared, there’s typically a long wait until spring when so many of our favorite landscape plants begin to bloom. However, one special treat during the cold winter and early spring months is having one or more of the winter-blooming, fragrant shrubs near our walkways and home entrances. The four shrubs that are included here are ones that are less commonly seen, but can make excellent additions to the woodland garden. These plants will thrive in partial shade.

Winterhazel

The winterhazels (*Corylopsis spp.*) are deciduous shrubs with clusters of soft-yellow, bell-shaped flowers that stand out best when sited with an evergreen background. The zigzag branch habit offers additional winter interest until the fragrant blooms appear in late winter (early to mid-March in the Upstate) to steal the show.

Winterhazels are in the plant family Hamamelidaceae and are close relatives of witch hazels. They thrive in well-drained, acidic soils containing abundant organic matter. Clay soils should be amended with compost or composted pine bark to improve drainage. They have very few pests or diseases, and grow best when placed in afternoon shade, such as along the edge of woodland plantings. There are several species of winterhazels that are commonly found and are equally fragrant:

- **Spike winterhazel** (*C. spicata*) - USDA Zones 5-8; height 4-8 feet; width 6-8 feet; Native to Japan.
- **Buttercup winterhazel** (*C. pauciflora*) - USDA Zones 6-8; height 4-6 feet; width 4-6 feet; Native to Japan & Taiwan.
- **Fragrant winterhazel** (*C. glabrescens*) - USDA Zones 5-8; height 8-15 feet; width 8-15 feet; Native to Japan & Korea.
- **Chinese fragrant winterhazel** (*C. sinensis*) - USDA Zones 6-8; height 10-15 feet; width 10-15 feet; Native to China.
**Chinese Paperbush**

As the large Chinese paperbush (*Edgeworthia papyrifera*) leaves fall away during autumn, the silvery flower buds become evident. These buds slowly develop throughout the winter to eventually reveal the highly fragrant, yellow flowers during early March.

![Chinese paperbush (*Edgeworthia papyrifera*) buds at the tips of branches.](image1)

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The Chinese paperbush plants will reach 6 feet in height and 6 to 7 feet across. Plan for its size, as the paperbush does not transplant well, nor does it respond well to pruning. Choose a site for the paperbush shrubs with well-drained soil and under partial shade.

![Chinese paperbush (*Edgeworthia papyrifera*) flowers.](image2)

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**Sweetbox**

Sweetbox shrubs (*Sarcococca spp.*) are small, shade-loving, evergreen plants that possess a delightful fragrance during bloom. Their small, white flowers may be somewhat hidden among the foliage during bloom time in February, but the fragrance may be noticed from several feet away. As the name indicates, sweetbox are in the boxwood family (Buxaceae).

![Sweetbox (*Sarcococca confusa*) in bloom.](image3)

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Place sweetbox shrubs into well-drained soils under full shade conditions. They can be placed along a woodland garden edge or further into the shaded garden where light levels are too low for most shrubs to grow well. Growth rates are slow to moderate. Sweetbox are deer and rabbit resistant plants and rarely bothered by insect pests or disease.

![A spreading clump of dwarf Himalayan sweetbox (*Sarcococca hookeriana var. humilis*).](image4)

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Depending upon the species, the flowers are followed by small (½-inch), round, shiny fruit that become black or red at maturity.

There are three sweetbox species commonly found at nurseries, and all are delightfully fragrant:

- Dwarf Himalayan sweetbox (S. hookeriana var. humilis) with a mature height of 12 to 24 inches, has glossy black fruit, and spreads by rhizomes (suckers) to form a slowly widening colony. Hardy through USDA Zones 6-8.
- Sweetbox (S. confusa) grows to 3 to 5 feet tall, has shiny fruit which change from red to black when mature, and is hardy through USDA Zones 6b to 8.
- Fragrant sweetbox (S. ruscifolia) grows to 3 feet tall, has round, red fruit, and is hardy through USDA Zones 7-9.

**Winter Daphne**

Winter daphne (Daphne odora) is closely related to the Chinese paperbush in the Thymelaeaceae plant family, and perhaps of the two species, more commonly found in Southern gardens. Like the paperbush, winter daphne is best planted in partial shade in well-drained soil, and does not transplant well. Winter daphne is a small, evergreen shrub that grows 3 to 4 feet tall and wide. Daphne foliage may be either solid green or variegated with cream-edged leaves, and their strongly fragrant flowers may be either pale pink or white.
Flower buds appear during the late fall and early winter and typically open during late January and February. Flowers are formed in clusters at the ends of branches.