

*Nature puts
on a show
year-round
at Tower Hill*

Winter Gardens

By Nancy Sheehan
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

It's the berries. And the barks, the evergreens, the silhouettes and the subtle colors that make the garden a beautiful place in winter.

At Tower Hill Botanic Garden, guides lead tours every Sunday, even in winter, pointing out to bundled-up visitors quieter garden features upstaged at other times of the year by thick foliage and showy blooms. When the weather is too cold or snowy, tours of the Orangerie, with its spring-evoking collection of citrus trees, or other indoor exhibits are offered instead.

But, when possible, the tour guides take to the outdoors to see the subdued but still engaging sights of the winter garden. While rhododendrons rule in spring and a plethora of plants are summer standouts, there are a few that wait until winter to shine.

"My favorite is the Himalayan birch," said Tower Hill volunteer

Richard Kimball, at the close of a winter garden tour he led recently. "With its white, white bark, a Himalayan birch is just absolutely outstanding in the winter, especially when there's a real blue sky behind it."

Are you sure it's your absolute

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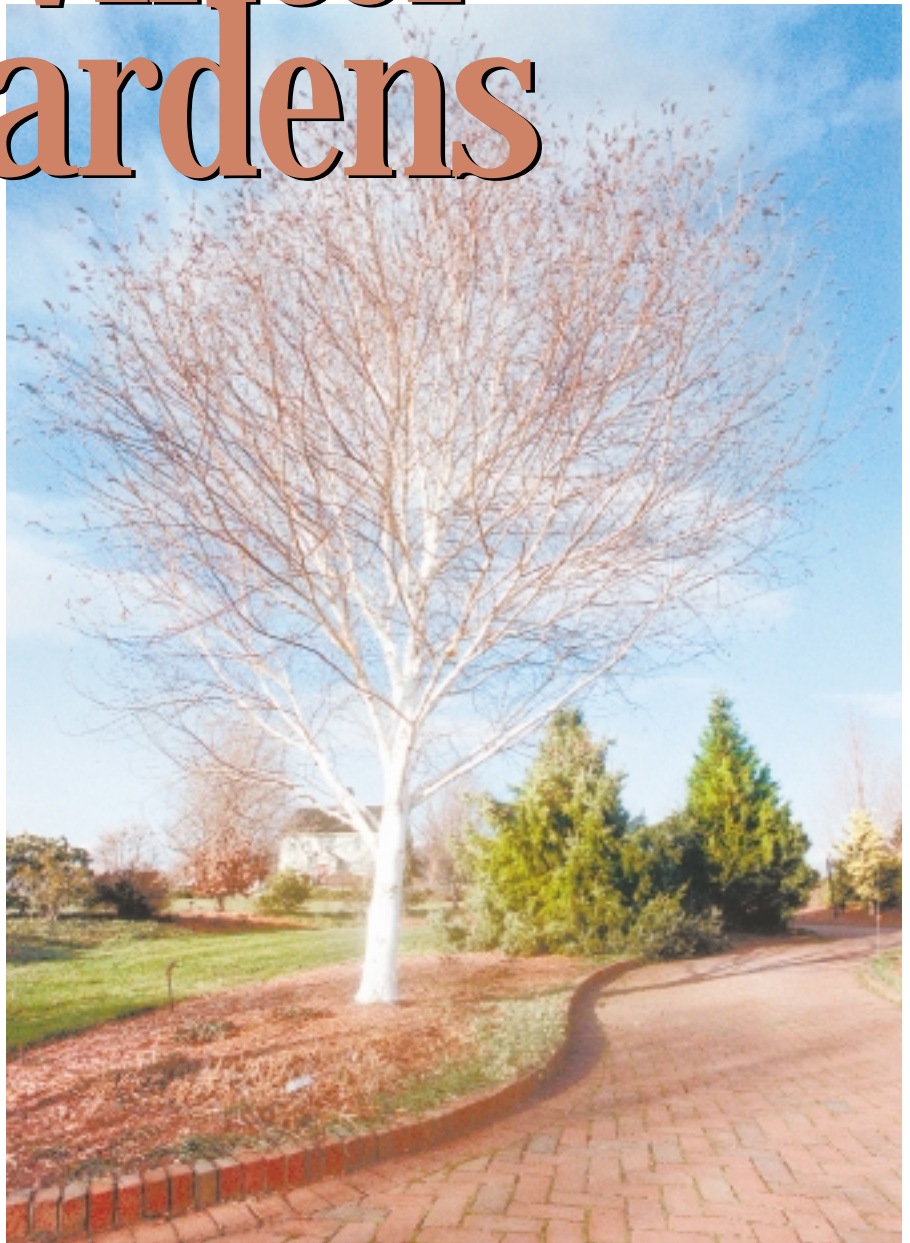
Sunday Garden Tours

■ **Where:** Tower Hill Botanic Garden, 11 French Drive, Boylston.

■ **When:** 2 p.m. Sundays

■ **How much:** Free with admission to Tower Hill, which is \$7 for adults, \$5 for seniors, \$3 for youth age 6 to 18, and free to members and children under 6.

■ **More information:** Call (508) 869-6111, Ext. 10, or visit Tower Hill's Web site at www.towerhillbg.org.



T&G Staff Photos/BETTY JENEWIN



Above, Himalayan birch.

Left, Joann Vieira, superintendent of horticulture at Tower Hill Botanic Garden.

Right, Paper Bark Maple.



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favorite?

"It's either that or the paper bark maple," he said. "It looks a lot like our native birches because its bark peels off like pieces of paper, but it has a really nice cinnamon color to it."

Another appealing peeler is prunus maackii, or Amur cherry. The several specimens at Tower Hill have orangy yellow bark which, as it peels back away from the trunk, gives a variegated effect. When the sun comes out, it's the tree that shines.

"When the sun hits it, it's almost golden," said Mr. Kimball, a psychology professor at Worcester State College. "And when it's golden, you don't see anything prettier in the winter."

To a bird, a pretty sight is a bush with a lot of berries on it. Ilex verticillata, a native deciduous holly, is covered with bright red berries throughout the winter. The reason the berries last so long is their tart taste, which makes them sort of a desperation dinner for birds.

"They kind of hold off eating them until very, very late in the winter," Joann Vieira, superintendent of horticulture at Tower Hill, said. "It's almost a starvation

food for them. If it's a good winter and there's a good food supply for the birds, they don't bother with them, which makes it nice for the garden."

The sweet, blue-black berries of the North American red-stemmed dogwood don't linger as long.

"The birds love them," Ms. Vieira said. "They get them so quickly that the berries aren't really a feature." It's the shrub's vivid deep red bark that gives it its visual bite.

"It looks incredible against snow," Ms. Vieira said. "It's just really beautiful." At Tower Hill, a red-stemmed dogwood plant is part of a striking winter grouping, its burgundy stems contrasting with the lush green of a white pine and the sparkling bright white bark of a paper birch, decorated as if for the holidays with its own dangling catkins.

To get the dogwood to put on its most colorful winter show, it's important to trim the plant back significantly each spring.

"You can see on the base of the older stems that they're getting gray," Ms. Vieira said. "It's always the young growth that's the most colorful so we cut down

about a third of it every year and some years we cut them right to the ground."

Which, at the time of the tour last weekend, had yet to be covered by snow, nature's natural mulch.

"Snow is good because it insulates the ground and keeps it from freezing and thawing repeatedly," Ms. Vieira said. "It's especially for perennials that's a big problem. It tends to heave them out of the ground."

Most of the trees and shrubs, like red-stemmed dogwood, don't really care, once they're established, whether there's a blanket of snow on the ground as winter's coldest days approach.

But the unseasonably warm fall weather threatened to leave plants out on a limb.

"Fortunately, we're not dropping from that 70-degree weather we had right down to extreme cold," Ms. Vieira said. "The plants would not have become acclimated to winter and they would not have tolerated it very well. But it's been cooling down and gradually approaching normal temperatures. They're ready now." ■