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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Early blooming plants offer a tease of the approaching spring

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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Even with the extreme winter weather around the nation and some miserable rain and cold locally, I see hints of spring.

Winter can be so bland with many trees and shrubs being bare, but usually starting in late January and into February spring flowering begins to give us a little warm season tease. In my observations, we are a few weeks behind on many of our late winter flowers because some things I normally see brightening the landscapes have not appeared. But they are coming soon.

Someone called me about their daffodils not blooming yet. Normally there are at least a few dabbled about by now. I saw a few daffodil buds yesterday and hopefully they will be yellow and perky later in the week.

Early blooming plants give us a tease that spring is near. Winter honeysuckle, cherries, star and saucer magnolias, daphne, winter jasmine and quince are about to pop out all over the place. These are some showy plants that can add interest to any landscape.

Winter honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*) is a not necessarily a pretty plant, but it flowers nicely, and the fragrance is outstanding. I would consider it a little old-fashioned because I mostly see it in mature landscapes. When I learned about this plant in school, they told us that it smelled like Fruit Loops when it bloomed which is a fully accurate description. It is a great plant to have tucked away behind some prettier plants so it can be seen in the winter and disappear in the summer. Winter honeysuckle has an upright leggy form so it can be messy to those who like well-shaped plants, but it can find a spot in the landscape for some seasonal interest.

There are many flowering cherry trees available, but one of the first to bloom is the Okame Cherry (*Prunus 'Okame'*). With a medium to dark pink bloom, the Okame is the cherry that is

best associated with the annual Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, D.C. *Prunus* is a genus of about 200 species of deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs and are grown for their showy flowers, colorful foliage and/or attractive bark. These ornamental fruit trees can be a good addition to a landscape, but are usually short lived.

Star and saucer magnolias (*Magnolia stellata* and *Magnolia x soulangeana*) are both deciduous magnolias that have the nurseries hopping to sell these early bloomers when exploding with early season blooms. It is rare to not see these blooming by now, but they are going to start soon. Star magnolia has a 3- to 4-inch white fragrant pedaled flowers. The saucer magnolia is an amazing bloomer with tulip-like flowers all over the tree. The colors of these blooms are a variety of white, pink, rose, purple, magenta and burgundy. Both magnolias are great remedies to the winter doldrums. Make sure to get a variety that is a later bloomer because a hard frost while in full bloom will ruin an amazing bloom in one night.

Campbell Vaughn: When it comes to insecticides, you need to mix it up for maximum effect

Winter daphne (*Daphne odora*) is my favorite fragrant plant. The smell is so sweet with a little fruity hint, like the aforementioned Fruit Loops cereal but sweeter. It is a hard plant to grow because it is slow to grow, finicky and needs shade. I saw one yesterday that will be engulfed in blooms in the next 10 days. If you have Winter Daphne and it is blooming, invite me to your house to visit because I love it.

Winter jasmine is considered a vine, but really grows a lot like a shrub of switches. The bright yellow flowers load the branches of the plant before the leaves bud out in the spring. It is one of the first plants to bloom in midwinter. Winter Jasmine is a great plant for hillsides and tolerates a lot of shade.

Quince is an ugly plant, but it can really put on a display with its flowering. It is a plant that has scraggly branches with thorns that would make a rabbit not want to come near. But quince explodes with flowers throughout the entire plant with deep reds, pinks, whites and even some apricot varieties available.

Dull plants with no leaves in winter can be tough on the psyche for outdoor lovers like me. We are so close to seeing a great early season landscape show. I know I am excited.

