

# Snowy Delights

Rosemary is a hardy plant for all seasons.

In December I returned from a month-long trip and found two plants blooming in our garden. Not roses, not fuchsias — frost in October put paid to summer's leftovers. The only things in bloom in our yard were rosemary and winter jasmine. Flowers in winter always come as a pleasant surprise, even those that can be relied on. The main reason I grow winter jasmine is to be irrationally startled when bright yellow flowers break out along the green stems in December, right on time. Flowers on rosemary seem even more implausible, perhaps because I associate the plant with the warmth of summer, when its scent is most noticeable.

This shrubby member of the mint family comes from the rocky shores of the Mediterranean.

*Rosmarinus* is its botanical name, from *ros* (dew or spray) and *marinus* (the sea.) It has narrow, leathery, aromatic leaves, dark green above and felty white beneath, resistant to salt spray and drought.

Flowers are small but numerous, in varying shades of blue or, rarely, white. Most books give spring as the blooming season for common rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), but the author of *Durr's Trees and Shrubs for Warm Climates* says the bloom is most pronounced in his Georgia garden in December, January and February. I expect it depends where you live.

Rosemary looks handsome in the garden all year round, and deer won't eat it. It has many other uses, and more than its share of folk lore. A couple of women in the herb business once told me "where rosemary thrives, woman rules." Sprigs have been laid on pillows to keep away bad dreams, and on the graves of loved ones as a symbol of remembrance. A gift of rosemary to a friend means that friend will never be forgotten. There is also the legend that the blue flowers got their color when the Virgin Mary hung her cloak on a rosemary bush on the flight into Egypt. Both Christians and pagans include it among the "greens" they traditionally bring inside for winter holidays.

As a medicinal herb, rosemary is said to aid digestion and ease mild headaches. I also have it on good authority that cut rosemary stems repel wasps from the *al fresco*

dining table. I learned this tip too late last year to put it to the test, but some of rosemary's culinary uses have been very well tested indeed. It makes a wonderful flavoring for a pot of beans, roast potatoes, chicken or grilled lamb. I use it most often on pizza (fresh leaves, snipped up small with scissors) for which purpose I am willing to dig it out of the snow, as I had to do earlier this month.

Whatever you use it for, it's handy to have some rosemary nearby. This might mean growing at least one plant in a pot. If the pot is portable, you can bring it into the house, or a convenient porch, for winter. There is apparently a compact variety named 'Huntingdon' which might be worth seeking out for a container.

Rosemary needs at least half a day of sun and, most importantly, good drainage. An established plant growing in the garden needs little or no summer watering, so it's a great choice for a dry, sunny spot against a house wall. Dry soil will keep growth within bounds, and the more sun the plant gets, the more aromatic the leaves.

'Tuscan Blue' is a popular variety with flowers in a good strong blue. 'Miss Jessup's Upright' (the one I currently grow) is, according to some people, hardier, but the flowers are paler. W. Arnold-Foster, who introduced 'Tuscan Blue' to cultivation, wrote of rosemary: "For its scent it is a delightful plant to grow beside a door or gateway." Other writers suggest

planting rosemary next to a bench or path, where you can easily brush it with your hand. 'Prostratus,' the hardiest trailing form, is one of the best plants to soften a hot retaining wall.

Bush forms of rosemary can grow four to six feet high and spread even wider, but you can prune them to fit almost anywhere. Pruning is best done in spring, immediately after flowering, although dead branches can be removed at any time. A hard frost can damage rosemary, and stems may split under the weight of wet snow. Root rot from excessive winter wet is a more common cause of dead stems. Rosemary may be short-lived in this soggy neck of the woods, but new plants grow very quickly. **EW**



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