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Get Wild: Winter flora in the High Country

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | Dec 1, 2023

Stasia Stockwell
Get Wild



Rose hips are pictured among lodegepole pine needles.

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Winter brings with it a blanket of cold and white and a time of quiet slumber for many species of flora and fauna. Aspens have long since shed their golden leaves, wild raspberry, strawberry and huckleberry bushes have gone dormant for the season, and the vibrant wildflowers that spread across the Alpine all summer have succumbed to the frosty temperatures. But not all plants are completely dormant in subdued hues of brown and gray, even in the High Country.

Evergreens, of course, maintain their verdant hue throughout the seasons. Our mountainsides often appear to be two-toned peaks of deep green and bright white. Look closely and you'll see that the needles aren't the only color on some of these trees. Rocky Mountain Junipers are an evergreen shrub that sprout pale, dusty blue berries that have an aroma like what you'd imagine winter in the Rockies should smell like. These berries have been used by humans for centuries; Indigenous peoples often utilize them for both ceremonial and medicinal purposes. Juniper berries are equally important to wildlife, with birds and other fauna using them as a food source in

One plant that still shows pops of color in the cold, dark months of winter is the rose. There are a handful of specific varieties that grow throughout the state, many of them in the Alpine. While these plants don't show off their delicate pink flowers in winter, the rosehips — the plant's fruit — often ripen in winter and speckle the landscape with dots of vibrant red. These are beautiful to look at against the stark contrast of bright, white snow and the deep evergreen hues that drape across the mountainsides. But they serve more of a purpose than just beauty. Rosehips are an important source of food for wildlife in the winter, including birds, squirrels and rabbits

Along the edges of wetland areas and near streams, another plant brings color to the High Country. The red twig dogwood — a shrub native to the Rockies — may not bloom its tiny white flowers this time of year. But, as the name indicates, the vibrant maroon of the branches stands out amidst the snowy landscape. While Colorado's High Country may have cold winters, the sun is still persistent with lots of bluebird days throughout the season. Those douses of sunshine make the dogwood twigs that much more stunning and saturated with color.

Tree bark and rocks might not be the most colorful part of the mountains in winter, but what grows on them can often be. Sure, lichens technically aren't flora — they are their own species — but they are one of the hardiest living organisms on our planet, able to survive some of the harshest weather and coldest temperatures the mountains can possibly throw at them. Even in the dead of winter, lichens grow on tree trunks and rocks all across the Alpine. Some of them are a bright rusty orange while others pop colors of neon green. In winter and summer, lichens are a vital part of our mountain ecosystems.

As you head out into the mountains this winter with skis or snowshoes strapped to your feet, take time to move slowly and notice the vibrant colors of winter. You might be surprised at what you find when you look closely.



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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Stasia Stockwell is a Breckenridge resident and avid backcountry skier. A true mountain dweller, she feels most at home in the Alpine. Stasia writes primarily for the outdoor adventure realm, with the desire to connect readers from all backgrounds with nature in a meaningful way.

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