

## Gardening Diary

### NOVEMBER & DECEMBER

While native trees perform well in the colour stakes, showier garden plants such as Japanese maples, liquidambar and euonymus provide the spicy shades of scarlet, yellow and orange to brighten the run up to winter. The sun has little power to warm the soil and rains are plentiful to bring back soil moisture to normal levels.

### DECORATIVE GARDEN

Most people wait until November to carry out the big autumn clear up. It's a good time to trim back summer flowering shrubs and to keep trees within reasonable boundaries. Candidates for cutting back hard include the butterfly bush (*Buddleia*) and lavateras. The stems of tall roses are also best trimmed back by around a third to minimise any wind rock.

Not all shrubs will appreciate a winter trim, so don't get too carried away with the secateurs. Cutting back spring flowering shrubs such as forsythia, prunus, viburnum and flowering currants will ruin the forthcoming display, so leave them well alone until summer when they have produced all their blossom.

Once you have trimmed back the shrub border, dig out any weeds and mulch the surface with Miracle-Gro Moisture Control Pine Bark. When placed about 5cm (2") deep on the soil surface this organic layer will help to retain moisture six times longer than bare soil. This mulch layer of pine bark will last for at least three years to provide a long-lasting and decorative surface.

Planting up new roses, shrubs and trees is still possible. For permanent structure nothing beats the beauty and well-behaved nature of conifers. These evergreen plants can be found in all shapes and sizes from rockery miniatures (*Chamaecyparis Minima Aurea*) to soaring columns (Juniper Blue Arrow). Those of us with small suburban gardens will appreciate the dwarf conifers that carry attractive steel blue, vibrant yellow or bright green foliage. Do visit your local nursery or garden centre to view what they are offering. All retailers will be happy to help you choose the most appropriate types for your garden although many plantsmen and women will advise you to spend an equal amount of money on planting as you do on the plants themselves.

Unfortunately planting correctly for quick establishment is more than watering the container and burying the roots. Most of these shrubs and trees will have been grown in highly organic composts that are totally unlike the mineral soil in most peoples' garden. Unless you do some soil improvement, the plant roots that have been happy for a year or so growing in its container are unlikely to venture out into the harsh mineral environment of pure clay, gritty sand or stoney chalk. After digging your planting hole that should be deeper and wider than the container by at least 5cm all round, mix in equal amounts of Levington Rose, Tree & Shrub Compost plus a handful or two of Miracle-Gro Organic Choice Root Booster Plant Food. Place a 5cm layer of this enriched planting mix into the hole and dig into the bottom of the hole. Adjust the amount of mix in the planting hole so that the planting level is similar to the one in the container. Now fill the space around the root ball with the enriched planting mix firming down as you go with your knuckles. Water well and again during the first winter if the soil dries out.

Some hardy shrubs that only flower in winter are best planted in pots. In this way they can be moved into a prominent position whenever appropriate and placed at the back of a border in their down time. My front door is blessed with a Christmas box (*Sarcococca*) during the January / February period when it produces tiny white flowers that are rich in hypnotic perfume and at other times it resides beside a rhododendron where it receives Miracle-Gro Azalea, Camellia and Rhododendron Liquid Plant Food throughout the summer. Other plants for winter pots include Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*), Hebe Autumn Glory, *Viburnum fragrans* and *Mahonia japonica*.

Before planting up these jewels in patio containers, check with the nursery if they need Miracle-Gro Azalea, Camellia & Rhododendron Ericaceous Compost or whether they are happy in Miracle-Gro All Purpose Compost and adjust your feeding in subsequent years to match.

Your garden should be blessed with plenty of seeds and berries to delight the local bird population. Hedgerow hawthorn and holly produce attractive berries and cotoneaster and pyracantha offer similar food. But however abundant the berries in your garden, wild birds will appreciate supplementary feeding from your bird table. Use packet seed that includes nuts and other goodies rather than simple bread crumbs to ensure your feathered friends get a mixed diet that is rich in various nutrients. Blue tits and other song birds will be attracted by black sunflower seeds and peanuts hanging in string bags. And all wild birds seem to appreciate the suet cakes of fat and seeds that build up their resistance to the cold weather.

Cut back the stems of perennial plants and add to the compost heap. Tie up the foliage of phormiums and cordylines to prevent damage from the winds and to minimise the amount of water that could freeze in the junction between the stem and the leaf.

### **TOPICAL TIP**

There is still time to sow seeds of sweet peas if you can provide some protection in a cold frame from extreme frosts and from foraging mice. Soak the seeds overnight to soften the hard shells and sow 3 or 4 around the edge of a pot filled with Miracle-Gro Organic Choice All-Purpose Peat-Free Compost.

### **LAWN CARE**

Left on the lawn for weeks, fallen leaves encourage diseases and can lead to bare patches where grass is fighting for light and air. That's why it's best to remove them at weekly intervals so problems do not build up.

There are plenty of leaf blowers and vacs to reduce the toil of this regular job, some of which will even shred the leaves as they are collected.

As winters become milder and wetter grass rarely stops growing completely and trimming lightly will be required on a monthly basis during bright mild spells. To keep the grass tidy during winter, adjust the cutting height of the mower so that the grass is left at least 3cm (1in) long. This will avoid any potential for scalping and thus reduce the amount of moss that can infiltrate into bare patches.

Reshaping of the lawn is appropriate at this time of year after you have pruned back shrubs and trees that form the main skeleton of the garden. For straight edges tighten string between two stakes and for attractive curves arrange a hose pipe as

appropriate. A special half-moon lawn cutter will help to provide clean edges rather than the raggedy results often achieved if you use a spade.

### **TOPICAL TIP**

It's your last opportunity to prepare your lawn for winter with EverGreen 'I want Complete autumn lawn care". This balanced feed also contains a moss killing agent to control any autumn moss.

### **THE PATIO GARDEN**

Choose frost-resistant terracotta pots or look-alike plastic ones to create interesting containers of mixed winter-interest plants. Your local garden centre will have all the ingredients including an open free-draining compost such as Miracle-Gro Organic Choice All-Purpose Peat-Free Compost. Below compost level plant tulip bulbs and crocus followed by spring bedding plants such as common daisies (*Bellis*) wild pansies (*Viola*) and wild primulas. These mixtures of plants will provide colour and interest through winter and into spring, especially if supplemented with some foliage plants such as yellow variegated ivy and sage or plum red heuchera. For more immediate colour you will find winter cyclamen and pansies in flower now plus the berried beauty of St John's Wort (*Hypericum*) or the ericaceous prickly heath (*Pernettya*).

Alpine plants growing in sink gardens or stone troughs will flower better next spring if they are protected from regular winter rains with a sheet of clear Perspex. As their name suggests these high altitude plants are not too bothered about really cold weather, but they do tend to rot off if roots are permanently wet or rain is allowed to stagnate on the foliage. Many of these alpine plants are naturally dormant under snow cover where they have cold but dry conditions, so water from the sides if necessary and place the troughs in the best light conditions possible.

Remove pumps from ponds if they are not to be kept running throughout the winter and clean them thoroughly. Remove tender plants such as water hyacinths and store in a bucket in a greenhouse or other frost free light place. A covering of fine netting will help to keep falling leaves from fouling the pond and also deter birds of prey who may swoop in to take your fish. Feed fish occasionally in mild weather.

### **GROW YOUR OWN FRUIT & VEGETABLES**

There is still time to plant fruit trees, canes and bushes for long term production of luscious berries and tasty fruit.

If your garden space is limited, a bush of blackcurrants placed among shrubs is a good idea. Or you could think about planting a row of raspberries or a mix of tayberry, boysanberry and loganberry against a dividing fence. These cane fruits will be highly productive and take up little space. Before you start planting, dig in plenty of your own garden compost or bags of Miracle-Gro Gro Your Own Soil Improver to improve the soil structure and its ability to hold water and nutrients. For ease of support, take out a trench and plant the canes 40cm (16in) apart. Fill in the trench with soil that has been mixed 50:50 with Miracle-Gro Soil Improver plus a few handfuls of Miracle-Gro Organic Choice Fruit & Vegetables Plant Food. At the end of each row, knock in a stout post, at least 2m long, that should be strutted to provide firm anchorage for wires stretched along the row. The fruiting canes can then be tied to the horizontal wires for ease of picking and to prevent them being blown over in the wind.

In the vegetable garden you should have some parsnips to dig and some curly kale to pick. Leave a few extra parsnips on the soil surface so they catch the first of the frosts. This will improve the sweet flavour of these vegetables that are best roasted or boiled and mashed together with potatoes.

Winter is a difficult time for garden birds such as wood pigeons. When food is scarce they will descend on winter greens, stripping the leaves and fouling the crop. That's why it's a good idea to cut some hearts of white and red winter cabbages and store them in cardboard boxes stored in a shed or garage. The remaining brassicas left outside will benefit from some netting protection to keep the pigeons from ruining your crop. Brussels sprout plants should be staked to ensure they are not rocked around or blown over by high autumn winds. Firm the soil with your heel to ensure winter brassicas are solidly fixed into the soil.

### **INDOOR GARDENING**

The Flowers & Plants Association reported in the summer that annual sales of pot plants rose by 30 per cent compared to the previous 12 months. FPA communications manager Sarah Holland said: "The rise in pot plant trends suggests that some people are preferring to buy indoor plants as a longer-lasting decorating choice in favour of cut flowers, as sales of cut flowers have not shown the same year-on-year increases."

Britain's favourite pot plant continues to be the amazing and exotic moth orchids (Phalaenopsis). After purchase they seem to bloom for months and if given the right conditions will continue to grow for many years, regularly producing new flowering stems that add beauty and interest to any windowsill. All they need to thrive is a moist atmosphere, reasonable light and average indoor temperatures. The grey aerial roots that pop out from the pot absorb moisture from the air and they appreciate a mist with plain water twice a week. After a couple of years you will notice that the plant starts to grow sideways towards the light and will start to look untidy with more roots than leaves. This is the normal growing attitude for these tropical wonders that grow naturally along the branches of tropical trees in the jungles of Malaysia and Thailand. The roots cling to the tree branches where they absorb the ever present rainfall that falls almost every day in these areas.

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Always read the label. Use pesticides safely.

EverGreen "I want complete Autumn lawn care" contains ferrous sulphate.

We recommend you always wear gloves when gardening.

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