

Winter Colour

What a damp Autumn 2023! The rain and winds unfortunately ensured we didn't gain from long lasting leaf colours and buttery yellow to orange and red foliage as per 2022. The good news is that rain will hopefully ensure a bumper crop of Camellia flowers. Unlike last year December was extraordinarily mild; grass lawns were still growing.



Now winter is upon us, giving some of us time to rest and reflect.

This is when evergreens come into their own and bring colour, occasional flowers and scent to our gardens such as Skimmias, Sarcococca and Rhododendrons – but also consider those deciduous shrubs with colourful stems such as Cornus, Salix gracilistyla and Vaccinium.

Winter doesn't have to be dull & boring



Also take a look at the Ornament selection in the design section on my website to bring colour & additional interest & structure.



Winter Shrubs & Trees to consider

When thinking about winter colour you also need to consider plants which will look good in other seasons as well.

The picture above relates to a winter garden, which is fine if you have the space, whereas it certainly radiates colour in winter it will be mainly green in the other seasons – for example the white stemmed **Rubus cockburnianus** in the foreground is a type of bramble with little to offer in Spring or Summer but is a great contrasting colour in winter. The orange stemmed **Cornus sanguinea** fares a little better offering small creamy flowers in summer and autumnal leaves in autumn – this plant is best planted in amongst other deciduous shrubs. The **Prunus serrula** multi-stemmed trees are one of the best all-rounders offering winter interest Tiger red peeling bark and structure, followed by impressive pale pink blossom blooms in spring, red fruit in summer and autumnal leaves in autumn.

Starting with trees – consider: **Acer griseum** or even **Betula utilis** var. 'Jacquemontii' – the whitest bark in the Birch family. Or **Acer palmatum** 'Sango Kaku' a small deciduous tree with red stems and butter yellow leaves in autumn. Alternatively try a **Malus** crab apple tree which will display small red fruits in winter, spring blossom and rich colour toned leaves in autumn.

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For the shrubs think evergreen along with a mixture of deciduous. **Vaccinium corymbosum** – Blueberry bushes can offer red stems in winter, white flowers & green leaves in summer followed by edible fruit and rich autumnal leaves in autumn. **Skimmia x confusa** 'Kew Green' a male evergreen shrub with winter off-white flowers which exhale strong fragrance in early summer. **Nandina domestica** also evergreen offers new red foliage in winter & spring, small cream flowers in summer followed by red berries in autumn & winter.

There are still many other trees & shrubs to choose from but hopefully this gives you a taster for creating a winter delight.

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Fruit Trees & bushes

Winter is the best time to prune fruit trees and /or bushes to encourage future vigorous growth – just refrain from the stone fruits such as cherries & plums as these should be pruned only in the summer months



Generally deciduous plants will be dormant so are less likely to be stressed during this essential process – start by cutting out any dead wood & remove crossing or rubbing stems/branches

Generally, flowers, which will later turn into fruit once pollinated, establish better on horizontal stems – so where possible encourage stems to lie horizontal or an angle less than 50degrees.

Flower buds tend to be larger than leaf buds – so try not to cut too many of them off.

For apple trees and gooseberry bushes you need to remove any central stems to create a goblet effect – this improves air circulation, plus that way you'll be able to harvest your gooseberries without scratching your hands!



Try not to cut more than 25% off though.

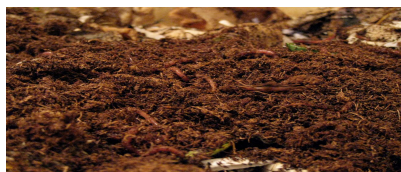


Winter Tasks.

There are various tasks to perform over the coming months – here are my Top 9

ONE – Mulch, Mulch, Mulch

You are probably wondering why I always mention this in every newsletter – the thing is there is never a bad time to mulch your garden so to suppress the weeds, enrich the soil, retain moisture and make the garden look neat & tidy – however Winter is the best time to apply at least 8-10cm depth to your borders to do the above and also protect tender plants from the expected freezing temperatures.



TWO – Keep off the Grass

As the temperatures drop your grass will stop growing at 7C (degrees centigrade) and below. Furthermore, if it becomes frozen / frosty it can be damaged if stepped on.

Winter can also be wet, so should your lawn become waterlogged leave it to drain within the day – during prolonged waterlogging it's recommended that you aerate it – apply drainage using a fork for example to limit recurrence.



THREE – Shake off Snow

Snow can be considered as a type of mulch and can protect plants from excessive cold. However, the snow usually experienced within the UK is the heavy damp version and can damage plants by weighing them down and potentially snapping the stems or branches – it particularly proved an issue during last year December 2022 cold snap. Where possible it's recommended to shake off the snow from your evergreen shrubs such as Camellias, Ceanothus and Pieris which have particularly fragile branches

FOUR – Raise pots

Ensure any potted containers are raised off the ground to allow drainage to occur – their roots can be prone to rot and cold damage if allowed to sit in water. Should you have any pot saucers, they are up-ended or placed upside down under the pot to get the container off the ground. There are pot feet lifters, or you can use bricks on larger containers



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Winter preparation

FIVE – Sharpen Garden tools

While your tools are not being used, now's a good time to clean, sharpen & lubricate your equipment. Lawnmower blades must be kept sharp otherwise they will damage your grass and potentially introduce diseases. The same goes with secateurs and pruning loppers – a clean sharp cut with limit infection getting into the plant. Also lubricate any tools with a mineral oil to ease operation and reduce potential of seizing gears / motors when next used.

SIX – Fruit trees & bush pruning

Prune fruit trees (except cherries, plums or any stoned fruit which need to wait until mid-summer) - refer to pruning guide on previous page. Cut back autumn raspberries to ground level in January / February – summer raspberries are cut back in September / October. For red & white currants fruit forms on new / this year's growth, but black currants on last year's growth and older.

SEVEN - Buddleja pruning

Buddleja can be pruned hard in both winter and spring – winter is done to reduce 'Wind rock'

EIGHT – Remove water timers / irrigation

Before the frost sets in, drain any access water from your outdoor garden pipes. Those of you who have water timers, best bring them inside or cover with frost protection as the expanding water will render them useless – you won't be needing any outside irrigation until mid-spring.

NINE – Wildlife care

Often, it's the wildlife which bring further joy to our gardens this time of year, so clean the birdbaths from debris and thaw if frozen, plus top up bird feeders. If you have a pond – place an old inner tennis ball in the water so it doesn't allow the water to totally freeze and enable rotting vegetation gasses to escape.

Evergreen Alternatives to Buxus / Box Hedging

Taxus buccata – Common Yew, relatively slower grower but no significant pests or disease problems at present. Foliage can be topiaried and will grow to a sizeable height & width.

Euonymus japonicus – available in a variety of different green coloured leafed species. Relatively quick growth rate up to a meter high.

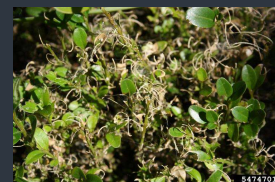
Lonicera nitida – available in a variety of different green coloured leafed species. Quick growth rate up to 2 meters – requires regular trimming to keep shape.

Pittosporum tenuifolium – variegated colour leafed species. Relatively quick growth rate beyond 2 meters high. May require protection during cold winters.

EYE ON

Buxus sempervirens

Commonly known as Box – the popular easy growing evergreen hedging which can be shaped / topiaried to your hearts content is severely under threat from the *Cydalima perspectalis* or Box tree moth & caterpillars.



Initially Box was under threat from Box blight an airborne fungus which will turn leaves brown and stems to die. However, the caterpillar pest, which has been spreading northwards from the south having entered via Europe over 3 years ago will devastate a bush within days. The moths can withstand temperatures down to -30 degrees centigrade, so are unfortunately here to stay.

There are treatments and controls in place for both the disease & pests, but for moment they are more of a remedy than cure – as both are liable to return.

Spring Lawncare

Usually, your lawn will probably not look its best during the winter months – this will mainly be due to grass not growing at temperatures below 7C and therefore not being able to recover from any damage inflicted during this time. One compensate for the lower temperatures and lesser light period is that weeds also are less prone to grow and compete.



If your lawn looks like the above, do not despair. Spring is one of the best times to repair and encourage healthier lawns.

- **Scarification** – this is like giving your lawn a strong vigorous scratch – either using a wire rake or mechanical device your lawn will be freed from thatch debris, moss and composted leaves.
- **Aeration** – the above picture's large bald patches are potentially caused by compaction and waterlogging, i.e., the ground is too hard and excess water / rain is unable to drain. Using a pronged device such as a fork is used to create holes in the lawn and allow air in.
- **Top dressing** – here the holes and top of the lawn is covered by a 1-2cm layer of topsoil mixed with sharp sand.
- **Fertiliser** – only to be used if prolonged temperature average is 10C and above – with a higher ratio of Nitrogen to Phosphorus & Potassium to encourage green growth.
- **Levelling** – undulations caused by ant nests or holes dug by foxes / pets are removed – **never be tempted to use a roller** as this will further compact the soil and require further aeration
- **Lawnmower maintenance** – ensure any mechanical devices are kept sharp and serviced in winter when not in use.

Upcoming Events / articles

- **Seasonal interest – Further tree selection ideas**
- **Summer & Autumn hanging baskets and containers**
- **Pest & diseases update**
Controls using nematodes – when and how to use them
- **Summer Lawncare**
how to encourage healthier lawns
- **Summer bulbs and planting ideas**
- **Composting**
making the most of your garden waste
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Recommended Gardens & places to visit during this season

- **RHS Hyde Hall, Chelmsford Essex** – look out for the winter garden area for a dramatic choice of planting ideas & colours
- **Beth Chatto Gardens, Elmstead, Colchester Essex** – known for selecting 'the right plant for the right place' this garden is spectacular all year round – but don't dismiss winter and look out for the Cornus selection of planting amongst the pond banks.
- **Celebration Garden, Aylett Nurseries, St Albans** – free admission (donate to charity optional) to their garden borders will give you ideas closer to home.
- **Myddelton House Gardens, Enfield** – free admission (small charge for parking) – look out for the Snowdrop event in January