

ASH PARISH GARDEN CLUB OFFICERS

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R.H.S. LONDON AND WISLEY

We are affiliated to the RHS who's benefits include competitive insurance cover, free gardening advice, a free group visit to an RHS garden, (54 members to visit Wisley club trip in Summer) access to medals (Banksian medal) and show stationery and a free monthly copy of The Garden magazine (see Brenda Winton if you wish to view). Our membership number is 10564709.

EDITORS NOTES

Brian – Stories to ernestperry33@gmail.com hard copy to Chris

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

- SPRING SHOW 8th APRIL
RHS Malvern Spring Festival – 11-14 May
 - PLANT SALE 6th MAY
RHS Chelsea Flower Show – 23-27 May
 - SUMMER SHOW 3rd JULY
RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show – 4-9 July
RHS Flower Show Tatton Park – 19-23 July
 - OUT MEETING 7th AUGUST
 - AUTUMN SHOW 9th SEPTEMBER
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GARDENING CALENDAR FEBRUARY

A lot can be achieved in your garden during February, particularly on days when the ground isn't frozen or waterlogged.

Plant

Plant bare-root trees and shrubs, and 'in-the-green' snowdrops (snowdrops with leaves). This is also a good month for planting Jerusalem artichokes, shallots, raspberries and blackberry canes, if weather conditions permit.

Prune

February is also the time to hard-prune your hedges, if you didn't do it in the autumn. Deciduous garden hedges can all be cut back fairly hard now. Make sure the frosts haven't lifted newly planted trees and shrubs, re-firm around them lightly using your hands or heels if necessary.

In terms of plant maintenance, now is the time to cut back deciduous grasses, ideally down to 15-20cm before new shoots emerge. Deadhead winter bedding plants for bushier displays later in the year, and start preparing seed beds for spring vegetable sowings.

THE MESSAGE OF THE GARDEN

Going with the Flow

To plant a fruit tree, I first dig a hole three times the size of the root ball. In heavy clay soil, this takes a while. While I shove the sharp spade blade into the thick dirt, jump on the back of the spade and lift out piles of tannish soil, the tree waits nearby. Once the hole is deep enough, I drag out the hose and fill a foot or so of the hole with water. It slowly seeps in. The flow of water into clay soil is not something I can rush. Pouring on too much water in an attempt to speed things up just makes the pit fill more, or if I am watering on the surface of the soil, it just runs off, wasting water. So while my hole sucks up water, I tinker in other parts of the garden, tasting peas and turning the compost.

Once the water is mostly absorbed, I pile a little compost into the bottom of my hole to hold up the root ball. I don't want to put too rich a compost in the pit, for the tree will have a rude awakening when it absorbs all these nutrients and then has to force its way into that dense clay layer below and around it. But a little will give it a boost, like giving your child a vitamin pill.

I unwrap the tree's root ball and hoist it into my hole, then fill the moat around the ball with another round of hose water. The root ball absorbs some water and the clay hole slowly sucks up the rest. I trim branches off bushes, munch more peas and scoop chicken poo out of the coop. When the moat has disappeared, I fill the area around the baby tree's roots with the clay I pulled out of the hole, loosening clods as I go. I create a sort of trench around the base of the tree to hold water. I fill the trench, and let it soak in.

THE WAY THINGS ARE

I cannot rush how clay absorbs water; it flows in its own time, on its own rules of relationship with soil. I cannot make the apple tree grow ten feet and sprout fresh apples in a day, or even a year. In the garden we work with natural rules, things we cannot rush or control. Perhaps this is why it helps us slow down our minds, entering a state of our own flow. We develop an energized focus as our attention is pulled away from the chatter of daily life and into a relationship with our bodies and the land. We settle into a state of enjoying what we're doing, even if that is as simple as waiting for water to sink into soil.

I become aware, too, of how my own body is, just as it is. I may be frustrated that I cannot do something, but the limitation is no different from how fast water flows into roots. That's just the way things are right now. I become aware of my limitations, but also of my strength, for while I cannot lift rocks indefinitely without hurting my back, I am blessed with quite a bit of strength and ability. When I enter into the present moment of

the garden - the tree alive and growing on its own terms, the water flowing into soil only as fast as the soil can accept it - I enter into what gifts I have to work with in this moment, no more and no less.

receive a baby tree, the soil effectively reached out to me, inviting me into further relationship. Meanwhile, the sun beamed ultraviolet B rays onto my skin, transforming cholesterol into vitamin D3, enabling me to use calcium effectively, strengthening my bones. Strong bones are a good thing in a gardener.

Gardening is a web, a patchwork, an ecosystem. You, the gardener, are at the centre, dancing or flowing with it all, in this moment, just as it is.

GIFTS FROM THE GARDEN

In fact, the garden gives us a little more to work with than we might have otherwise. The bacteria *Mycobacterium vaccae* in soil have been found to activate a group of neurons that produce the brain chemical serotonin, which helps us feel good. Healthy soil is literally an antidepressant. So perhaps as I prepared the earth to

receive a baby tree, the soil effectively reached out to me, inviting me into further relationship. Meanwhile, the sun beamed ultraviolet B rays onto my skin, transforming cholesterol into vitamin D3, enabling me to use calcium effectively, strengthening my bones. Strong bones are a good thing in a gardener.

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THIS MONTHS RECIPE

Chocolate Brownies

Most people love any chocolate-related recipe. The addition of cranberries, dried fruit, chopped dates or diced apple will not only make this mixture go further but taste delicious too. The addition of chocolate chips may be regarded as a step too far - even for chocoholics.

You will need

3 eggs

8 oz. soft, dark muscovado sugar

6 oz. self-raising flour

2 oz. cocoa

A handful of cranberries

4 oz. sunflower/rapeseed oil or softened butter

To do

Whisk the eggs and sugar until creamy and well blended.

Add the oil or butter. Whisk in.

Sieve the flour and cocoa together and stir carefully into the egg and sugar mix. (If you whisk at this point the dry ingredients will go everywhere.)

Once the powdery ingredients have been well incorporated you can then use a whisk.

Add the cranberries or fruits of your choice. Stir well until fully blended.

Tip the mixture into a 9 in. square baking tin.

Dot the top with a handful of cranberries or quartered glace cherries.

Bake for about 25 minutes at gas mark 4 or 180°C (350°F).

Cool for a short while in the tin and then cut into 16 pieces.

SPRING SURPRISES

DAVID WHEELER

Having moved to this corner of southwest Wales last year, we're ignorant of its spring and summer characteristics. We're anxiously waiting to see what delights lurk in the burgeoning garden and woodland glades.

Just a week into the new year, there was a goodly sprinkling of snowdrops under a venerable chestnut tree. Beneath sycamores and limes, daffodil foliage was pushing through the sods in thick battalions. It will be a few weeks yet before I know whether we have a legion of brazen, retina-staining King Alfred's or a more diverse and pleasing assembly of desirables, flowering over a long and satisfying period. I'm doubtful.

It's no good surveying the scene and saying to yourself you'll put fresh and different bulbs in next autumn where bare or skimpy patches exist now or where drifts of samey varieties are failing to excite. You must bring out the smart phone. If you take photographs of places that need some attention, marked perhaps by a stick or a large pebble, you'll know exactly where to plant when new stocks of bulbs arrive in the shops in the autumn. Better still, raise new additions in pots and decant the contents into vacant or impoverished places next spring when the same old scene repeats itself.

I know already that this garden is deprived of crocuses. Their distinctive foliage would surely be apparent by January, even if later-flowering kinds loiter unseen in hidden, brambly dells.

Visiting nearby gardens that open to the public in the year's first couple of months makes it possible to compile a list of bulbous plants that will also do well in your own garden.

My own tally includes numerous crocuses and hundreds if not thousands of *Anemone blanda* in the 'Blue Shades' variety (cheap as chips if you buy them wholesale) which ought to naturalise and increase in number in short turf. This anemone's perennial joy emanates from an early flowering - by March, almost anywhere in Britain - and its knack of surviving a massacre of its leaves by the time the grass needs mowing.

Over a 20-year period at our previous garden, a mere hundred bulbs spread widely in the orchard to give coverings of cerulean blue flowers that amply compensated for prolonged spells of grey skies. Better still, they were able to compete spiritedly with other plants, including the thickly matted roots of three-foot-tall *Iris sibirica*, whose flowers provided a similar but much taller 'sea' of blue in midsummer.

I referred to this pairing as our low and high tides - such was the depth and purity of the colour and the ocean-like waving of foliage on breezy days. No great skills are required to accomplish any of this. I might, however, need a master class to succeed with a long-held ambition to establish a colony of much-loved aliens. Trilliums! These North American wildflowers fantastically first revealed themselves to me in great number when I stopped one April day on a lonely stretch of road in Vermont to respond to a call of nature.

Carpeting groves of dogwood and sugar maple, there grew one of the temperate world's most alluring and beautiful of all bulbs, flowering shoulder to shoulder, chalky white beneath a high, arboreal glow of emerging lime-green leaves lit by an afternoon sun.

It's a vision I've held dear for more than 30 years. *Trillium grandiflorum* - will you appear for me here?

OPEN A BEE 'N' BEE

Early spring is the time to create bee accommodation that is snug and safe for these important pollinators, says Clare Wilson

MANY bee species are in decline across the world, but there are things we can do to help boost their numbers on our home turf.

I have previously covered ways to make sure your garden has lots of flowers for pollinators in order to provide their food sources, pollen and nectar. The key thing is to avoid flowers with "double" blooms, like most roses, where the reproductive parts of the flowers have been converted into extra petals, so they lack nectar.

Another way to help is to provide homes for solitary bees -the majority of bee species in the UK - which make their nests in soil, hollow plant stalks or cavities in brickwork.

If you are in a country where spring is getting going, now is a good time to make some tempting real estate for species such as the red mason bee (*Osmia bicornis*), as young individuals tend to emerge in April and May in such places. They then start looking for a place to build a nest and lay eggs.

You can buy ready-made bee hotels, although some are badly designed and large ones may encourage too many bees to live close to each other, which seems to encourage parasites. It is also possible to buy "bee bricks" for use in construction, but one study suggests that they aren't particularly favoured by bees.

Fortunately, it is easy to make your own bee hotel. One method is to take an old log and drill holes up to about 8 millimetres wide into one face. The deeper the holes, the more eggs will be put in each one, so make the cavities as long as possible without breaking through the other face of the log.

Starting at the bottom, the bee will lay an egg, deposit some pollen and nectar, seal it in with mud and repeat. She can lay up to 40 eggs in multiple cavities over several weeks.

Another reason to make the holes deep is that woodpeckers may eat the grubs that are closest to the outside.

Another option is a bundle of bamboo canes or hollow, woody plant stalks. These can be wedged horizontally into an old pipe or a large plastic soft-drink bottle with the bottom cut off. The edge of the pipe or bottle should stick out a little further than the canes, to help keep out rain.

With either method, make sure the ends of the canes or the holes drilled into wood have smooth edges, as any sharp splinters could tear a bee's wings, says Dave Goulson, a bee ecologist at the University of Sussex, UK.

Once constructed, fix your bee hotel in a south-facing spot, so that it gets plenty of sun, at least 60 centimetres off the ground. A site on a fence or shed is ideal, as putting it on tree trunks can leave it too shaded.

If you don't have anywhere for a bee hotel, consider helping out ground-dwelling bees by leaving a patch of dryish, crumbly soil in a sunny spot undisturbed. They will make their own holes in it

What you need

Old log and drill (for wood-based design) Plastic soft-drinks bottles or old pipe (for the alternative design) Bamboo canes or hollow, woody plant stalks (for the alternative design)