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

NEW PROGRAM SECRETARY

Program Secretary Mrs Penny Slack has arranged for the 2024 speakers but in order for a program to be organised for 2025 a new program secretary needs to be found. Any volunteers?

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

- **SPRING SHOW 6th APRIL**
- RHS Malvern Spring Festival – 18-21 May
- **PLANT SALE 11th MAY**
- **RHS Chelsea Flower Show – 21–25 May**
- **OUT MEETING 3rd June**
- **SUMMER SHOW 1st JULY**
- RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show – 2–7 July
- RHS Flower Show Tatton Park – 17–21 July
- **AUTUMN SHOW 7th SEPTEMBER**

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.

THIS MONTHS RECIPE

Anne Willan's Chocolate-Chip Cookies

The classic recipe should not be ruined, advises Anne Willan in her Complete Guide to Cookery (Reader's Digest, 1989), by a temptation to replace hand-chopped chocolate with ready-made chocolate chips. You have been warned. Makes about 24 palm-sized cookies.

You will need

150g plain flour
Half tsp salt
125g unsalted butter, softened
75g caster sugar
75g light brown sugar
1 small egg
1 level tsp bicarbonate of soda
lOOg high-quality dark chocolate, chopped

To do

Preheat the oven to 190C/375°F/Gas 5.
Sift the flour with the salt in a roomy bowl.
Beat the butter with the two sugars till the mixture is light and pale.
Beat in the egg.
Dissolve the bicarb in a teaspoon of hot water and stir it into the mixture.
Fold in the flour in three batches.
Stir in the chocolate.
Drop heaped teaspoons of the mixture onto a couple of lightly buttered nonstick baking trays, making sure they're about 7cm apart to allow for spread.
Bake for 15-20 minutes, till the edges are browned, the middles still pale.

Allow to cool a little before transferring to a baking rack.
Store in a plastic box in the fridge.

WILD FLOWERS OF BRITAIN

Wild flowers have always been important, the basis o(crops and medicine and an inspiration to poets and artists. For centuries children have made daisy chains and poppy ladies, picked four-leaved clovers and held buttercups under each other's chins. Dock leaves were rubbed on nettle stings, cleavers were thrown on clothes and dandelion clocks were blown to tell the time. Today we still notice wild flowers more than we realise. They are a link with the natural

world. Coltsfoot along the road verge tells us that spring is close at hand, clumps of ox-eye daisy brighten dual carriageways and help us to relax after a busy day. When flowers disappear from the countryside we become concerned about the health of our environment. Our grandparents recall with nostalgia the days when fields and woods were full of colour and there seemed to be simple pleasures to enjoy; all this without necessarily knowing the difference between figwort and fat hen.

The total complement of flowering plants in Britain is about 1,700. This includes many obscure species unlikely to be encountered or noticed on casual visits to the countryside. However, any selection designed to make identification easier is bound to involve the omission of some interesting and attractive plants.

Over the forthcoming months I will be following up on all that can be seen in our woods and hedges so keep your specs handy and let me know what you find.

MY NATURE CURE

DAVID WHEELER

A year ago, queuing for the surgeon's knife, I pictured my garden, as the anaesthetist began to inject his numbing potion into my spine.

The op was scheduled to last five hours - 'but it'll seem like five minutes to you,' he said, as I slipped into unconsciousness. I don't recall dreaming of my garden during the process, but images of special plants flooded into my dozy brain throughout recovery in ICU.

Back home after a week, I wondered if I'd manage to cook and eat Christmas dinner -1 did, but retreated under the duvet pretty soon after.

As recovery progressed and strength returned to my ancient limbs, I was keen to get into the garden. Alas, no chance of that for several more weeks. And, anyway, the garden in December and January was as sleepy as I was.

Soonish though, I started to fiddle with some bonsai trees, raised 15 years ago while I was recuperating from previous cancer treatment. Scissors, a few lengths of copper wire and bowls filled with compost and grit were easily managed - satisfying a vital urge to get gardening again, however small the scale.
A year on, and I'm making a two-acre woodland garden, having spent many summer and early-autumn months sourcing trees and shrubs, taking numerous

cuttings and messing about with seeds. Admittedly, I have paid help two days a week and a partner seemingly always on hand to tackle those once-easy jobs.

I can now drive myself to several wonderful gardens (Aberglasney, the National Botanic Garden of Wales and Picton Castle), and I'm within reach of at least one (I wish there were more) good plant nursery.

My recovery is entirely due to medical science; the garden also played a part. The last thing I want to do is slop in an armchair, feeling sorry for myself.

Having an interest - nay, a passion -is essential and it doesn't matter what it is: model railways, quilting, stamp-collecting, photography, calligraphy, candle-making, metal detection. Just do it. And, of course, anything involving some proportionate physical exertion -and conviviality - is supreme.

We outsiders regret the agonisingly short days at this time of year. I have a new potting shed (the Potting Palace, no less). Importantly, it has electric light, which means that, come four o'clock, when outdoor toilers must hang up their spade and tread reluctantly back home, I can carry on at the bench, making labels, mixing compost, repotting rootbound plants and fixing pin-ups (of plants!) to the walls...

I'm not a compulsive diarist, but I do have more time now to log some of my horticultural activities and record things going on around me. Noteworthy of late was the way in which so many plants were behaving abnormally.

In November last year the leaves on our two mature copper beech trees were ablaze with streaks of bronze, orange and purple - doing fabulously what they're supposed to do at that time of the year.

But, at odds with the season, our venerable rhododendron was similarly ablaze - with flowers! It looked the way it should in May, with cheery trusses of heart-warming colour. Weird.

Apple trees were blossoming shyly, as was Osmanthus delavayi, with delectable, scented, white flowers rightly belonging to April. Again, weird.

I'm told it's a natural response to specific environmental conditions -prolonged heat and drought, both of which we experienced in May and June.

Counting my blessings (better than sheep), I make full after-dark use of the Potting Palace lights: dimmer - but friendlier by far - than those of last year's operating theatre.

DAMSONS

Simon Courtauld

I don't think I have ever come across damsons in France. Prunes de Damas is the name for them, suggesting their origin in Syria. The English damson has also been called 'damascene', which supports the connection, and another small plum, the mirabelle, has the Latin name Prunus domestica syriaca.

Whatever the link to that benighted country, damson trees grown in Britain are hardy, and modern varieties require very little space. Farleigh Damson and Prune Damson are said to be full of flavour and reliable in colder areas, and both are self-fertile. Trees and cordons are available from Pomona Fruits, for planting in winter and early spring.

Damsons like clay or loamy soils. and well-rotted manure to retain moisture, but the site should be well-drained, as all plums hate being waterlogged. Containers are a good alternative, but the potting compost must never be allowed to dry out.
As damsons are among the earliest fruits to flower, a sunny, sheltered spot is advisable to protect the blossom from frost. Yields can be greatly increased by the addition of a nitrogen fertiliser, but beware of branches snapping under the weight of fruit. Pruning should be done in summer, when there are fewer spores to enable silver leaf disease to develop on the plants.

Similar to damsons, although spherical rather than oval, are the wild plums on a tree that has grown here for years and is probably a bullace. They are purple/blue when ripe, and last autumn we gathered more fruit from the one tree than from our five apple trees. Very few plums have appeared this summer, but we still have plenty of plum chutney from last year's crop.

Driving through Normandy last month, we enjoyed not damsons but the delicious greengages the French call Reine Claude, and an eau de vie made from mirabelles. These little plums, of Syrian and Anatolian origin, are grown in abundance in north-eastern France and widely used for making jam.

If you want to try growing a different plum, Mirabelle de Nancy and Mirabelle de Metz are recommended.

WATER PROJECT AIMS TO MAKE TOMATOES MORE FRUITFUL

Sensors that measure the width of a tomato plant's stem are being used in a pioneering initiative that could cut food waste.
The small sensor, which clips around the stem, measures its diameter to see how much water is in it. If there is too much, tomatoes split and cannot be sold, while if there is too little the ends of the fruit can rot, resulting in losses of up to 10% of the yield.

It is hoped that by identifying the water balance, farmers can then target irrigation better or adjust other greenhouse conditions such as ventilation and heating. The sensors are being used by growers in the Isle of Wight and Yorkshire, with supplier APS Produce installing them on Waitrose Duchy Organic piccolo tomato plants.

The 'field lab' project is run by Innovative Farmers, a research network funded by The Prince of Wales's Charitable Fund via sales of Waitrose Duchy Organic produce. If the trial is successful, the findings can be applied to crops such as peppers, cucumbers and fruit.

Brian Moralee, field lab coordinator and grower manager at APS Produce, explained: "The idea is to look at the water balance in the plant to try and reduce food waste. If the plant has too much water within it, we can get split fruit. If it's too dry we can get a reduction in calcium movement and get something called 'blossom end rot'."

Kate Pressland, from the Soil Association, says: "By matching the latest monitoring technology with the expert observational knowledge that growers carry with them every day, this research hopes to lead the

way in terms of optimising the growing environment for greenhouse plants."

Lucy Allen