

# To prune or not to prune – that is the question?



*Miscanthus, stately or messy*

It's January 1st and here I am in the garden. Low light levels, brooding skies, chill but still. The detritus of autumn spread all over the show. Back in November I glibly resolved to leave the Clear Up until Spring, which seemed such a long way off. Well I can't just sit back until March, looking out on that sorry mess for another two months. Besides, the birds need feeding, the paths need clearing, and I am going stir crazy indoors with nothing but post-Xmas cheese and chocolate to keep me company.

Well, Gardeners, you know what it's like, you go outside for a peek, and one thing leads to another, and before you know it you find yourself on your hands and knees, crocs for footwear and best jeans, fiddling around in the borders. Back inside, new resolve, change of clothes and off we go!

So, where do I start? The roses. Oh, but if I prune them now before the Real Winter kicks in, all the new shoots will be frosted. To hell with it, they'll recover. Anyway, their leaves are covered in black spot. The huge tender Salvias? It seems counterintuitive to cut them back whilst they're still flowering. Too late, too big and too lazy to dig them up, so I'll hedge my bets by piling their crowns up with mulch and only cutting them down to about 3ft. After all, they survived The Beast From the East. And I've got cuttings as insurance.

By now I'm feeling quite Gung Ho! Then there is the question of ornamental grasses. Experts advise you to leave seed heads on over winter for architectural interest and food for the birds. All very well, but whilst the tasselled stems of Miscanthus soar resplendent, their wispy leaves are flying all over the show like streamers. Only one option; comb out the leaves by hand of course. Our Horticultural Betters also tell us to leave the dried stems of deciduous grasses

as protection and only cut back when new growth starts to emerge in spring. Ha! Once that starts to happen are you supposed to get down with the scissors and individually sort the old from the new? In my experience tender grasses like Pennisetum are unlikely to survive whether you leave them intact or not, the rest will come through if cut back now; they're tough plants. Ferns ditto, autumn colour faded at bit, floppy fronds? If you like 'em, leave 'em. If you don't, chop 'em awf!

My all-time conundrum is what to do with Kniphofia leaves. The newer Popsicle varieties make it very easy, as their shoe-lace leaves just come away in your hand and the crown is below ground level. But the fleshier varieties, such as Great Dixter favourite Kniphofia Rooperi, don't make it obvious! As tempting as it is to chop their unsightly leaves back, one must resist. Leave



*Ferns in winter*

most of the foliage in place to insulate the plant crown but trim out any dead or badly damaged foliage by cutting it off at the leaf's base.

Cannas? Well, it all depends. I know, that's not very helpful. I dare say in a mild winter they might survive in the borders but as I prefer to display my Cannas in containers I should just move them undercover. Have you seen the size of my containers? I could treat them like Dahlias – lift them, prune back top growth to about 4 inches, lightly trim roots, submerge them in spent compost, surrounded by newspaper in wooden crates, store them in a cool but frost-free shed – but I really can't be bothered! Fortunately, having lifted and divided them last year I can afford to be cavalier about their survival as I have a profusion. Whilst I am confident that the majority will survive on the south facing patio, sheltered by the house and insulated by the pergola, I'm chancing my arm somewhat by leaving others in tubs by my exposed, north facing front door. Cut them down? While it's a pretty safe bet to cut back the sheltered ones, I'd exercise caution by leaving the north facing ones intact. A sure and certain case of, "Do As I Say not Do as I Do": in fact I have done the opposite: cut back completely by the front door, but left top growth to hang in tatters



*Hakonachloa - dried winter interest*

round the back. Why? Because I don't have to look at them every single day on the patio!

So in a nutshell, there are no hard and fast rules. Getting to know your garden's exposed and sheltered sites helps you to take calculated risks. No two winters are the same. I've learnt that cold and dry is often kinder to perennials than warm and wet. It's very difficult to kill a rose through hard pruning but very easy to let it grow leggy and out of shape by timid cuts. It's very rare that I've killed a plant through pruning it too early, but don't take risks with treasured plants if you're unsure of your actions. Trial and error, flexibility but above all, experience. That's pruning for you!

CAROLINE BROOME

THE GARDEN GIRL • 79 CHURCH LANE, EAST FINCHLEY, LONDON N2 0TH • M: 07757 016287 T: 020 8444 2329 EMAIL: CAROLINE@THEGARDENGIRLS.BIZ • LONDON GARDENS SOCIETY: BEST SMALL BACK GARDEN 2017 & 2018

## Medicine and gardening – a personal perspective

Associations between medicine, plants, gardening and health are longstanding. Early physicians, herbalists and apothecaries used herbs and other plants in their remedies and tinctures – a practice that survives in a more limited way today. More recently, but before the advent of pagers and mobile phones, on-call doctors of all specialities had to be available to respond to calls on their home phone. Many found that those hours on-call, but not working, were very conducive to growing vegetables, fruit and ornamental plants.

In the early years as a GP partner at Temple Fortune Health Centre my colleagues and I were on-call every third night and weekend. It was then that my own passion/addiction started. I found that not only was it a constructive way of passing the time, it was also a safe space in which to contemplate the myriad of clinical and administrative dilemmas that go with the job. I called it my psychotherapy.



At the same time the benefits of exercise were becoming apparent. Initially it was jogging, cycling and swimming, but later the whole gym craze. Personally I was convinced by the 'exercise in a green place' concept. Walking, running and other exercise outdoors had all the benefits of the indoor activity plus the additional bonus of being more in touch with the natural world – seeing the blue sky, hearing the drum of the woodpecker or observing the dashing flight of the sparrow-hawk. Soon research evidence was confirming the many benefits.

Gardening can be seen as 'exercise in a green place'. Bending, lifting, digging and a multiplicity of other tasks can help to keep the body in shape. Increasing evidence is showing the benefits for mental and psychological health and numerous schemes have been started for a variety of conditions, ranging from anxiety and depression to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Gardening tends to be collaborative and cooperative as compared with the working world, which can often seem to be confrontational and competitive. Gardeners tend to be agreeable people.

If you have a garden, do try to get out there several times a week when weather and other commitments allow. It doesn't need to be for too long to recharge the emotional batteries – a bit longer to count as significant exercise. If you don't have a garden, a stroll through Golders Hill Park, Central Square or Northway Gardens can be restorative. Even better, volunteer your services at such a place to make friendships and get the physical and emotional benefits. Hampstead Garden Suburb is fortunate in having a large supply of allotments for which there is currently no waiting list on many of the sites – how about applying for one? Finally consider joining the Horticultural Society and share in its wide-ranging programme. We have a talk in Fellowship House at 7.30pm on March 7 on the very topic of Gardening and Health.

DR CHRIS PAGE

## Suburb rainfall

The last quarter of 2018 was drier than usual but not as dry as the last two years. As a whole, though, with almost 24 inches of rainfall, the year was below the average of nearly 30 inches. The summer was particularly dry, which was great for picnics and outdoor events, but not so good for the grass and hedges which are so important for the landscape of our 'green and pleasant land'.

It is important to remember that, within its relatively small area, Britain as a whole has a considerable variety of micro-climates and, therefore, of weather. Where the rain actually falls tends to be in the west of Scotland and in Wales. Indeed, the driest area of the country might be the Barnet and Enfield boundary.

So, 'red sky at night; shepherd's delight – red sky in the morning;

shepherd's warning', is possibly more use than official weather forecasts; and we have had more than usual wonderful sunsets. At the time of writing, however, we could do with some more rain if we are to make any impression on our gardens and ensure that our brave roses, yet again flowering in spite of the season, continue to flourish.

DIANA IWI FROM MEADWAY

## HGS HS News and Open Gardens

The HGS Horticultural Society celebrated Christmas in style with a Sixties-themed evening. A good number of members were present, sharing delicious food and enjoying a fabulous selection of music accompanied by photos and videos from that time.

Turning our attention to 2019, we have a packed programme of outings, talks, plant sales, seed swaps and shows in this, the 110th anniversary of the Society's foundation. We have our first ever overseas trip over three days in July 2019 to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. All details can be found on the Society's website: [www.hortsoc.co.uk](http://www.hortsoc.co.uk).

The centrepiece of the 110th anniversary celebrations will be the opening of some of the most beautiful gardens in the Suburb for the National Garden Scheme (see pictures, back page). As well as opening the garden gates of eleven private gardens, three for the first time, and one of the numerous allotment sites, there will be other attractions for local residents and visitors alike: home-made teas will be served at Fellowship House, there will be seasonal plants for sale from professional nurseries The Plant Specialist and Rose Cottage Plants, as well as home propagated plants from a number of open gardens. Enter our famous raffle, with £100's worth of prizes. There is partial wheelchair access to several gardens. Maps will be provided to guide visitors to the Open Gardens via the Suburb's roads, twittens and woods.

Since its foundation in 1927, the National Garden Scheme has donated a total of £55 million to charity, the largest and best-known being Macmillan and Marie Curie. The NGS is the largest individual funder in the history of both charities, as indeed it is for all its nominated beneficiaries. In 2018 a record annual donation of over £3.1 million was distributed to its beneficiary charities as a result of funds raised by over 3,500 gardens opening during 2017.

There are some Spring 2019 dates for your diary. There is a talk

in Fellowship House on Thursday, March 7 at 7.30pm, which is followed by the Seed Swap. Dr Jenifer Wakelyn will be giving a talk entitled 'The Root to Mental Health: Why Gardening is Good For You'. This is free to members, and costs non-members £3.

There will be a Quiz Night on Saturday, April 13 at 7.30pm in Fellowship House, and a Plant Sale at the same venue on Saturday, May 18 between 10.30am and 12noon. Go to the website at [www.hortsoc.co.uk](http://www.hortsoc.co.uk) for further information on events.

AUGUSTA WOLFF



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## Welcome to St Jude's

**Sundays: 8am** Said Eucharist; **10.30am** Sung Eucharist

**6 February: 10am** Ash Wednesday

**31 March: 10.30am** Mothering Sunday

**14 April: 10.30am** Palm Sunday –  
Liturgy of the Palms

**18 April: 8pm** Maundy Thursday –  
Liturgy of the Last Supper

**19 April: 10.30am** Good Friday –  
Liturgy of the Cross

**20 April: 8pm** Saturday –  
Easter Liturgy

**21 April: 8am & 10.30am**  
Easter Sunday

*All Welcome*



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