

Now is The Winter of Our Content

I used to hate winter. As autumn approached it felt like The End. Dull days, low light levels, bleak outlook, hibernation. However, as the days grew shorter, the light finally dawned! I have changed my mind.

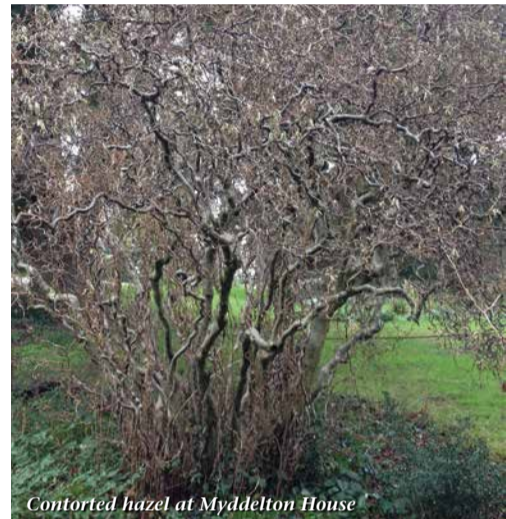
Walking around the winter garden, you may ask, "so what is there to look at?" At first glance, all you might see is decay and bare earth. But if you look closer you will start to notice the first signs of spring alongside the final throws of winter. When I was a retail buyer we used a purchasing technique called Dovetailing: just as last season's stock was being phased out you gradually introduced new season ranges. And so it is in nature: underneath desiccated ornamental grasses emerge snowdrops, winter aconites, narcissi. Alongside the dried seedheads of sedum and skeletal verberna, robust evergreen hellebores and euphorbias are coming into flower. Marbled pulmonaria and cyclamen jostle for space amongst rotting leaf fall. Never has the circle of life been so evident!



In my book, evergreen shrubs, lauded as the mainstay of the winter garden, can't hold a candle to deciduous shrubs such as contorted hazel, twisted red willow, arching white-stemmed rubus cockburnianus. Most of us have gazed up at tree canopies densely colonised by mistletoe but how many have been eye to eye with it? I swear you can't see the join! And there's nothing quite as evocative as the unexpected fragrance of viburnum, witch-hazel and edgeworthia, whose delicate flowers adorn architectural bare branches. Don't believe me? Then take a trip to Myddelton House in Enfield, <https://tinyurl.com/h9lgz6u>.

I'm going to be controversial here and say that I'm not the greatest fan of Kew Gardens. Too flat, too formal. The Palm House doesn't do it for me. However when it comes to the Festive Season you simply cannot miss the Sparkling Winter Trail www.kew.org/kew-gardens/whats-on/christmas. Innovative illuminations celebrate the grace, elegance and structural symmetry of trees in a way that their leaves simply do not! A magical light show unsurpassed, sheer magic.

So here we are in the Bleak Midwinter. With their economy of scale, large gardens are undoubtedly enhanced by leaving perennials



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with attractive seedheads intact; they provide structural interest and vital food and shelter for wildlife. But in small gardens, such as mine, that simply looks messy. (Nothing wrong with that, I hear those more relaxed gardeners amongst you say.) Once paired down it provides an opportunity to correct mistakes. All folly revealed after leaf drop. Dead of winter is about the only time I can stroll around my garden without the urge to do something! Plenty of time to savour jobs like pruning climbing roses. I love pruning roses, bringing order to chaos. It was only when the apple tree and the ancient lilac were laid bare did I see how the rampant akebia was doing its utmost to choke them to death. And how the ivy along the back fence was transforming into a top-heavy shrub casting unwanted shadows across the already dingy fernery below. Bare earth means you can see where to put your feet and the ladder without damage.

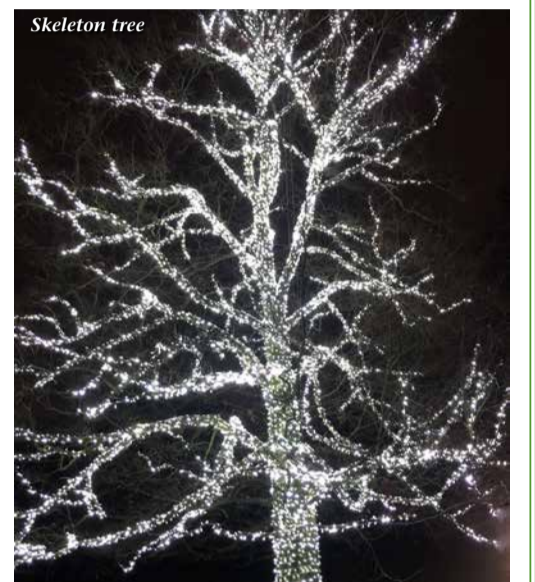
And on the subject of bare earth, nothing enhances the borders quite like a well spread manure mulch. Not only does it provide insulation and nourishment but it makes the borders look so finished! I sometimes think I treat the garden like a stage set and expect it to be perfect, but of course we all know a garden never stays the same from one day to the next. It's very disobedient, plants outgrowing their allotted space here and refusing to grow over there. One is always playing a game of catch up. Well, this is the time when you can sneak up on the garden whilst its asleep, plotting your revenge on those unsuspecting perennials. Come spring and you'll be ready to take action before they are fully awake.

I no longer consider winter as the poor relation to summer, in many instances quite the opposite in fact. Take the coloured stems of dogwood for example. Lurking at the back of the

border in full leaf for nine months of the year, they go unnoticed. Come December and their fiery stems often provide the only colour in the garden. To see them at their most impressive is to see them en masse; Golders Hill Park has a fine display. If pruned judiciously they can create high impact in the domestic setting too. Upright red cornus Alba sibirica looks best with its branches levelled into a slight arch and all its wispy crossing branches nipped off. Orange cornus Midwinter Fire, on the other hand, is best left alone, so its meshed stems create a fiery haze. Regardless of how little space you have, I urge you to plant in threes and prune hard (at least a third of the oldest stems) annually.

I say, never mind the old adage, 'Don't forget to stop and smell the roses'; whose got time in the busy summer garden? Take time to watch the birds instead!

CAROLINE BROOME



HGSHS Diary Dates

HGS Horticultural Society has planned a packed programme for 2020. Full details can be found in the members' handbook, on the society's website (www.hortsoc.co.uk), and on the What's On pages of Suburb News.

Dates for your diary are as follows:

13 Feb: Coach trip to Anglesey Abbey

7 Mar: Quiz Night

2 Apr: Talk on butterflies

2 May: our acclaimed Plant Sale

13 Jun: Summer Flower Show

21 Jun: Visit to Great Easton Open Gardens

3-5 Jul: 3-day trip to the gardens of North Devon

30 Jul: Coach trip to Aston Pottery and Rousham Gardens

5 Sept: the Autumn Flower Show with brass band

22 Oct: Talk on Finchley Nurseries

10 Nov: AGM and Prize-giving

5 Dec: Christmas singalong supper.

'GROW A POTATO IN A BAG' COMPETITION

By popular demand we are repeating our 'Grow a Potato in a Bag' Competition! It is open to adults and children of all ages and there is no entry fee. In 2018 it was a huge success with nearly 100 entries. Seed potatoes, growbags and instructions will be supplied by the society and may be collected between 11am and 6pm on Saturday 8 February from 4 Asmunds Hill, NW11 6ET and on Sunday 9 February from 48 Erskine Hill, NW11 6HG. Only the potato and growbag

supplied may be used. Your first task will be to 'chit' your potato. This means placing it somewhere warm and sunny for a few weeks to let it sprout and then planting your potato in your growbag on 28 March. Each crop will be harvested and weighed at the Flower Show on Saturday 13 June at 3.30pm.

NEW MEMBERS

New members are always welcome. To join, contact David Broome, Membership Secretary, on 020 8444 2329. You can now pay your membership on our website using Paypal. The annual sub is £7 (single) or £10 (double), due in January each year. This offers members free entry to all shows and most talks, copies of our newsletters and Handbook and a 10% discount on plants from local garden centres. Junior membership (under 18) is free.

OPEN GARDENS 2020

As usual many members' gardens will be open in support of the National Garden Scheme charities. Details will also appear on the Horticultural Society and National Garden Scheme websites, but opening dates are as follows:

7 Jun: 10 Wordsworth Walk, NW11 6AU and 48 Erskine Hill, NW11 6HG

14 Jun: 79 Church Lane, NT 0TH

21 Jun: 18 Park Crescent, N3 2NJ and 74 Willifield Way, NW11 6YJ

28 Jun: 26 Normandy Avenue, EN5 2JA

19 Jul: 18 Park Crescent, N3 2NJ.

MARJORIE HARRIS

Around 1950, WH Auden wrote a short poem called 'Their Lovely Betters'; the first lines read:

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade

To all the noises that my garden made

The noises came from a robin and 'rustling flowers'. No mention of lawn mowers, hedge trimmers or leaf blowers. Today, however, if we are lucky enough to sit in our garden, the chances are that our reflections on the passage of time will be interrupted by one of these noisy tools. So, we sigh and we bear it because we know that the same noisy tools will be used in our own garden to make it look they way we want it to look.

A lot has been written about the 'hate' for leaf blowers. The problem is that they are ubiquitous because they work. When there are a lot of leaves to be collected, it makes sense to use a leaf blower to gather the bulk of them into piles that can then be dealt with. Even the RHS uses leaf blowers because sometimes it is best to collect leaves. They advise the prompt removal of leaves on evergreens such as conifers, evergreen azaleas and silver-leaved plants because the fallen leaves will cause the

foliage underneath them to decay. There are also plants which suffer from winter wet, such as yuccas and Beschorneria, and slug-susceptible plants, such as Echinacea (especially seedlings), which all need swift uncovering. If you have a pond or a water feature, these will rapidly become clogged if leaves are not removed. It is also essential to remove leaves from paths, drives and drains. Once gathered, leaves can be added to the compost heap to counterbalance a mass of green material such as grass clippings, or kept separate and converted into precious leafmould.

As a lot of us employ gardeners who are paid by the hour. It is understandable that they choose leaf blowers to enable them to finish the job in their allotted time. It still remains that leaf blowers are noisy and polluting, but there are electric versions which are greener. It is to be hoped that, with more emphasis being placed on the environment and more research being poured into the area, cordless and corded electrical blowers will become more capable and greener over the next few years.

The article in Biological Conservation highlighted the fact that biodiversity of insects

is threatened worldwide. Their review of 73 historical reports reveals dramatic rates of decline that may lead to the extinction of 40% of the world's insect species over the next few decades. It concludes that "The main drivers of (insect) species declines appear to be in order of importance: i) habitat loss and conversion to intensive agriculture and urbanisation; ii) pollution, mainly that by synthetic pesticides and fertilisers; iii) biological factors, including pathogens and

introduced species; and iv) climate change."

As we sit "on a beach-chair in the shade" the noise we would like to hear is the buzz of bees and if we listen really hard the fluttering of a butterfly. Perhaps we should use greener leaf blowers for a shorter length of time, start compost heaps and adorn our gardens with plants that attract insects like: alyssum, buddleia, honeysuckle, lavender, marigold, etc, etc.

MARIE-CHRISTINE O'CALLAGHAN

In case you are interested in the full poem:

Their Lonely Betters

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade

To all the noises that my garden made,

It seemed to me only proper that words

Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

A robin with no Christian name ran through

The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,

And rustling flowers for some third party waited

To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

Not one of them was capable of lying,

There was not one which knew that it was dying

Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme

Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters

Who count some days and long for certain letters;

We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:

Words are for those with promises to keep.

WH Auden

Reference:

Worldwide decline of the entomofauna: A review of its drivers

Francisco Sánchez-Bayo & Kris A.G. Wyckhuys

Biological Conservation, Volume 232, April 2019, Pages 8-27

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320718313636>



Suburb rainfall

2019 was almost a year of two halves. When writing for the last edition of Suburb News, we were suffering from a dry summer and were hoping that rain would soon come. Well, since then, rain has most certainly come. The 11.3 inches from October to December, while not quite a record, were certainly well above normal. Indeed, we have only had higher figures in just five years since 1980. However, the accompanying gales probably did more harm than the excess of water.

Over the whole year, rainfall was only a couple of inches below average.

The present high pressure has given us some wonderful sunsets and subsequent cloudless days. One spectacular red sky at night was followed by a red sky in the morning. So were shepherds expected to experience delight or warning? Certainly, the present pressure reading, at time of writing this article, is exceptionally high, though probably not a record.

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