

GARDENING

Spring into action



THE GARDEN GIRL

CAROLINE BROOME

It's Spring, and after a long dreary Winter, the garden is greening up before your very eyes.

Blossom is breaking bud. Roadside verges are a froth of yellow. Vibrant, plump shoots are sprouting in all directions from dormant branch and stem. The air is full of promise.

So why is your heart so full of dread? Because, I guess, you know it's the start of the perpetual pruning calendar. A tyranny of overgrown shrubs, last year's flowers clinging on listlessly. Evergreens branching in all directions. A profusion of new season's growth appearing way above eye level on bare legged roses.

When faced with a tangled mass of branches, we can feel overwhelmed. Where to start? And how does one know when to prune; if we prune at the wrong time of year, will we kill the plant? It's simpler just to let the plant get on with it and hope for the best. And so, year on year, shrubs swamp their neighbours, ground cover disappears, flowers climb over next door's fence. Forgive the pun, but now is the time to nip it in the bud!

Firstly, let me reassure you that it's quite difficult to kill a plant from incorrect pruning. Plants want to grow. In all likelihood the worst you can do is stop it flowering for a year. In natural settings, left to their own devices, plants will grow to maturity, unencumbered by boundaries. In

direct contrast, a domestic garden is a man-made environment, and therefore it is necessary to 'manage' your borders. Regular annual pruning keeps a shrub from outgrowing its allotted space; it keeps it healthy by increasing light and airflow through its stems and encourages strong new growth. There are times when you shouldn't prune: Don't prune your hedges during nesting season. Don't dead-head your roses if you want rosehips. Don't prune during a freeze.

Rejuvenating an old shrub or climber can seem daunting but you won't go wrong if you follow these simple steps: Firstly, cut out any dead stems down to the base. You may need a saw. Likewise, stems that are crossing each other or growing at strange angles through the plant. If the plant is congested, you can remove up to a third of the stems, taking out the oldest, thickest and gnarliest: Do this every year and the shrub will have renewed itself every three years. To reduce its size, cut it back by about a third, stepping back to view the plant from time to time for a balanced shape, bearing in mind that this may sacrifice this year's flowers. Make your cut just above a new bud or leaf node. Don't leave a stump as it will only die off, look ugly and encourage infection.

It's easy to overlook the delights of spring ground cover where evergreen shrubs proliferate. Hellebores, pulmonaria, brunnera and spring bulbs create a tapestry beneath deciduous shrubs but will not thrive if swamped by low hanging evergreen branches. Skirt prune the lowest branches up to about 45cms to allow light and air to circulate.

What does flowering on old wood mean? Shrubs, such as lacecap or mophead hydrangeas, whose flowers bloom on last year's stems. If you were to cut these stems hard back now, the new stems would not produce flowers until the following year. Instead, lightly prune off the old flower heads down to the first set of buds, which in turn will produce this year's flowers.

Plants whose flowers bloom on this year's stems, such as hydrangea Annabelle, are easy to manage. Because, in March, the stems that will flower this year haven't grown yet! (It's a minefield, I know!) If you are not sure which category your plant falls into, then Google it.

Here are some helpful pruning hints for March:

- Modern shrub roses, hydrangea Annabelle, clematis (don't panic!) that flower after mid-summer, fuchsia, choisia, buddleia, sambucus, all flower on this year's growth and can be cut hard back in March, to 20cm from ground level. In contrast, 'old' bush roses and spring flowering clematis, which bloom on last year's growth, should be only trimmed directly after flowering.
- Winter flowering shrubs that bloom on bare stems, such as witch-hazel, wintersweet, viburnum, as well as evergreen garrya elliptica and mahonia, should be lightly trimmed to fit their space. For overgrown specimens this is also the time for rejuvenation pruning.
- Remove last year's flower heads from lacecap and mophead hydrangeas, if you are happy with the size of your lacecap or mophead hydrangea. If the shrub is getting too big, carry out rejuvenation pruning, bearing in mind that it probably won't flower this summer.
- Evergreens grown for their foliage, such as pittosporum, can be cut to shape now.
- Tender perennials, such as shrubby salvias are best left until end March, or after the risk of frost has passed.
- Compact, spreading hypericum is transformed by hard pruning to ground level now. Golden Beacon provides striking ground cover in the darkest spaces.
- Although February is the best month for pruning roses, it's not too late to catch up now.

Sometimes a plant will fail to perform to its full potential. Before you call time on it, try relocating it to a spot where it can flourish within your garden. By moving plants in Spring you are giving them a head start to re-establish their root system. Large clumps of perennials that have stopped flowering in the middle? Lift and divide them, throw away the oldest middle section and replace with two or three small outer sections.

Above all, Spring is the ideal time to re-evaluate your garden. The more you work your way around your garden, the more up close and personal you will get



Hellebore drifts at Borde Hill Gardens (Photo: Caroline Broome)

with your plants; which deciduous shrubs are the first to come into growth, which perennials have failed to reappear after a harsh

winter. You will start to appreciate the rhythm of the seasons, and your plants will continue to delight and challenge you.

Horticultural Society's new 2022 season

MARJORIE HARRIS

The Horticultural Society is determined to return to a normal schedule in 2022, and in-person flower shows will feature a scarecrow competition for all ages in June and Grimdsyke Brass will play live in the Free Church Hall garden in September. On 19th March May Webber will give her talk in Fellowship House on Butterflies and how to attract them to your garden, followed by a Seed Swap. To see the full programme and how to join, go to www.hortsoc.co.uk, but here are three future events to whet your appetite.

New for this year is a Spring Flower Exhibition to be held on Saturday 9th April, 2-4pm at Fellowship House, where the lovely sunny colours and scents of flowers will cheer us up after the long Covid winter. Bring your daffs, tulips, amaryllis or anything else you have grown to show off. Entries will not be judged, and should be brought to Fellowship House between 10am and 12 noon. Refreshments will be available and entry is free.

Also in the pipeline are the popular Plant Sale on the morning of 14th May and a much-requested revival of hugely-successful Suburb In Bloom on Sunday 17th July. Seven gorgeous award-winning private gardens and one allotment site will be open for charity from 11.30-5.30pm. Refreshments will be served all day at Fellowship House, with all profits from food sales going to Combat Stress, while ticket sales for the open gardens will benefit The North London Hospice. Finchley Nurseries will be selling a selection of plants and shrubs outside Fellowship House and the many raffle prizes will include a £100 gift voucher from Thompson and Morgan. What more could anyone want on a summer Sunday?



We'll bring your dream garden to life

Our professional team with seven years experience specialises in all types of garden landscaping including • Fencing • Decking • Driveways & Patios • Turfing • Irrigation. Also monthly garden maintenance undertaken. For further details or a free quotation, contact Noemi: 07718 592955 / 8374 8103 • naomilandscaping@gmail.com or visit our website at: www.naomilandscaping.co.uk

Naomi Landscaping

Four Seasons GARDEN MAINTENANCE

- ♣ Weekly or fortnightly maintenance contract
- ♣ Garden clearance
- ♣ Lawn care (mowing, turfing, fertilisation etc.)
- ♣ Planting
- ♣ Weed killing & treatment
- ♣ Hedge trimming, tree works
- ♣ Patio cleaning
- ♣ All general garden services

We offer a professional, reliable service with 16 years of experience at an affordable price. Call Roland or leave a message for a free quote.

♣ 07584 574520 ♣ fourseasonsgarden@hotmail.com