



THE GARDEN GIRL

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If you feel guilty about wasting water every time you run the hot tap, then let me reassure you that there are lots of things you can do in your own home and garden to mitigate the odd transgression. Talking of water, it seems arbitrary that while Thames Water has extended its hose pipe ban into 2023, Affinity Water has no plans to instigate a ban in the near future. As a responsible gardener I don't use sprinklers, I have a timed irrigation system and during dry spells only use the hose on those plants that are wilting. Shower, bath, kitchen and washing machine water, referred to as grey water, can be used in the garden. You can visit the RHS website at [tinyurl.com/3prvun3w](https://tinyurl.com/3prvun3w), for more information. It may be a case of closing the barn door after the horse has bolted, but if you haven't got a water butt then now is the time to get one. Lack of space? B&Q sells the Ward 100L Slimline Water Butt which is unobtrusive and relatively inexpensive.

It's been a long time coming, but finally the government has announced that sales of peat for use on private gardens and allotments will be banned in England from 2024. The quality of peat-free compost has been a bone of contention for years, the earliest substitutes falling wide of the mark. Fortunately however, these days, peat free composts have improved no end, making the switch much easier. On the home front, if you can make your own leaf mould and compost you are winning!

With electricity prices through the roof, heating the greenhouse may well be a luxury. My unheated greenhouse is still very productive. It has a raised bed which I use to grow my tomatoes and cucumbers in summer. When they are cleared out in October, I use the raised bed to overwinter my tender salvias and fuchsias. I water them sparingly until their leaves have fallen off. The soil should be just moist, as winter wet is more likely to kill them than cold. This period of dormancy can last as late as

March, and you could be forgiven in thinking they were dead but persevere. Once the fuchsias and salvias start showing signs of life, I prune them back to a strong basic framework of stems then pot them up individually and plant them out when all risk of frost has passed, so around here that's about early May. The spent compost from the raised bed is then spread over the borders as a mulch. Although it will be depleted of nutrients it will still help improve the soil, suppress weeds and retain moisture.

If you've got as many containers on your patio as I have, that's an enormous amount of compost to be disposed of. Unfortunately, summer favourites such as impatiens and fuchsias succumb to the dreaded vine weevil if planted in year old soil: If you've ever wondered why, when you go to water a wilting plant, it comes away in your hand with no rootball, it's because the little white larvae hatch in the soil and eat the roots. Chemical drenches are costly and bad for the environment and while you can use nematodes as a biological control, I find it easier to spread the spent compost onto the borders as a mulch, any vine weevil larvae will be welcome food for the birds. Nothing is wasted.

I like to save my tuberous begonias. As the foliage becomes frosted and falls away from the tuber, lift the tubers out of the compost. If you lay them on a tray indoors the soil and roots will dry out in a day or two and can be brushed off. Store the tubers, hollow side up, in cardboard egg cartons, in a cool dark place. (I store mine in our spare room drawers.) Take a look towards the end of February, and little pink 'pips' will have started appearing around the middle of the tuber. These are the new shoots. I usually keep mine in storage until about early March, then I pot them up, just below the surface of multipurpose compost, one tuber to a 9cm pot, pips side up, then water them in and allow to drain. If it's a mild winter you may be able to keep them in your unheated greenhouse or, if not, then in a warm bright room until the temperatures start to rise.

In the spirit of Reuse, Recycle, Reduce, the biggest dilemma remains the extensive use of plastics. So, as promised, here are some useful tips: The brightly coloured plastic trugs that have become so popular are invaluable, however over time their handles do snap off. I repurpose them as containers for gravel, crocs, vermiculite. Likewise, the clear plastic lidded tubs of fat balls, great for storing bird seed. Polystyrene plug plant trays can be broken up and used as fillers at the bottom of containers, with the added advantage of being lighter than terracotta crocs. Lidded ice cream tubs are excellent for storing seed packets. Plastic veg trays can be used as seed trays. Large plastic pots with their bases cut off can be

repurposed as collars around vulnerable new perennial growth, as a barrier to slugs and snails. The list goes on. Some nurseries such as Clockhouse in Enfield take plastic pots back, and the rest just get used again and again for raising cuttings, potting on plugs plants and planting up divisions.

And finally, with the festive season in mind, why not treat your wildlife to a hedgehog hotel, toad house or bird feeder. You'll never have to use slug pellets again.

Please note that Thames Water has now cancelled its hosepipe ban for customers across London and the Thames Valley.



A visiting hedgehog can eat catfood



A hedgehog hotel

## Come and join our club!

Are you mad about flowers? Ambitious to create your own vision of a green pollinated paradise? Gardens are a huge part of the sustainability movement and you don't have to have one to join the 300-strong members of the very active HGS Horticultural Society. They want you to bring fresh ideas to their committee too. Enjoy discounts at local nurseries, talks, garden visits – there's so much going on – and they'd love some people to bring their skills in website development, social media and sending out their newsletters.

If you live in or around the Suburb and would like to hear more, contact Caroline Broome for a chat: [HGS.Hortsoc@outlook.com](mailto:HGS.Hortsoc@outlook.com).



## Christmas Services

**Carol Service:** 6pm Sunday 18 December

**Family Christingle Service:** 4pm Saturday 24 December

**Midnight Mass:** 11.30pm Saturday 24 December

**Christmas Day Eucharist:** 10.30am Sunday 25 December



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