

WHAT TO DO IN THE GARDEN THIS MONTH: DECEMBER

With short days and long nights, most gardening takes place by the fireside, as catalogues arrive, gardening books are read and plans made. Take advantage of any mild days to continue outdoor garden tasks, and to add more winter colour to brighten up your garden.

TASK LIST

- Protect tender plants from the worst of the winter weather – wrap half hardy plants such as bananas, palms and tree ferns with straw and fleece remembering to fasten securely against strong winds. Mulch strawberry plants with straw and cut back cannalilies before lifting the rhizomes for storage in a frost free environment.
- Cut down any dead perennials that still remain and also clear away any annual flowers – dig over any vacant ground that is left and consider plants for gap-filling – there is an amazing range of evergreen plants that offer good foliage colour all through the dreary winter days. Refer to the list below for winter plants that offer flower, berry or leaf interest.
- Write off or use the internet for seed catalogues so you can browse through them during the Christmas holidays and make plans for your garden for next year. This bit of gardening is effortless and warm!
- Move planted tubs and containers of bulbs and winter bedding to sheltered spots in the garden out of the icy winds and remember to water over-wintering plants in the greenhouse and coldframe sparingly. In the greenhouse continue to check that the heater is working and that you ventilate it well on milder days.
- It is not too late to undertake some pruning – wisteria, fruit trees and bushes can all be pruned through December. Always collect up the trimmings immediately and burn them as leaving them lying around is an open invitation to disease. The bonfire ash can be used as a top-dressing, high in potash.
- Buy your fresh Christmas tree in good time – if choosing a cut tree make sure that it looks nice and green – give it a shake and discard any that lose a lot of needles. There are many different types of tree available but they fall into 2 main categories – non-drop (Nordmann Fir, Noble Fir, Fraser Fir) and the more traditional (Norway Spruce, Blue Spruce). Whatever you choose, cut an inch off the base of the trunk and stand your cut tree outside in a deep bucket of water for at least 24 hours before bringing it into the house. Try and find a cool spot in the house for the tree (avoid radiators!) and make sure it sits in a reservoir of water which is topped up regularly – treat the tree like a cut flower.

- Pot grown Christmas trees are more expensive but can be kept from year to year with a little care – make sure the temperature change is not too great – find a transitional spot like a porch or cool conservatory for a day or two before moving it in and out of the house. Once in the house, keep it watered and try to place in a cool spot. Re-pot your tree in the spring and make sure it is well watered through the summer ready for next Christmas.

- Many house plants are now available, offering a great variety of colour and foliage to brighten up the house. The bright red bracts of the Poinsettia plant have come to epitomise Christmas but they are one of the most difficult house plants to keep looking good. They hate draughts; they like a humid atmosphere; they like to be watered a little and often and finally they like a sunny and warm spot with only small variations in temperature so do not leave them on a windowsill behind the closed curtains at night. If you manage all that you might get your poinsettia looking good through to twelfth night!

PLANTS TO ENJOY IN DECEMBER

Arbutus (strawberry tree), Aucuba, Callicarpa, Cotoneaster, Chimonanthus (wintersweet), Cyclamen, Erica (heather), Euonymus, Hamamelis mollis (witch hazel), Hedera (ivy), Ilex (holly) Jasminum nudiflorum (winter jasmine), Pernettya, Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis' (winter-flowering cherry), Pyracantha, Skimmia japonica, Sorbus (mountain ash), Viburnum bodnantense, fragrans and tinus

DIANA'S CHOICE

One plant that looks good all year round but stars in the winter is the Mahonia. It has attractive evergreen foliage and fragrant yellow spikes of small flowers during the winter. This hardy shrub will grow to 6 feet or more and prefers a well-drained, moist soil in a partially shaded spot. It is therefore particularly useful for ground cover under trees. There are several varieties available but one of the best is 'Charity' pictured here.

