

# WHAT TO DO IN THE GARDEN THIS MONTH: FEBRUARY

*The dark, long winter nights are now beginning to shorten and the first signs of spring appear. Though the weather may be cold and wet, even freezing, the sweet violets join the crocuses and snowdrops in the garden to give some much longed-for colour.*

## TASK LIST

- If you're looking for some instant spring colour, plant up some containers with ready-grown bulbs and primroses which are readily available in the garden centre throughout the spring. Primroses come in a huge range of colours now and the best bit is the fact that they come back every year. When your spring pot is past its best, simply transplant the whole thing into the garden, ready for next year.

- When weather permits, continue digging over the ground to break it down; the frost will have done most of the work for you. If any plants have lifted in the frost, firm them down into the ground. Keep pulling any weeds that start to emerge – don't give them a chance to get going.

- Warm the soil if possible by making use of any cloches, cold frames or greenhouses you might have. This will enable a slightly earlier sowing of seed and give protection to the seedlings as they emerge. Seed of early crops of peas, broad beans and parsnips can be planted into the ground, along with shallots. Under heat, tomatoes, peppers and aubergines can be sown into seed trays of fresh seed compost.

- In the flower garden it is time to sow the slower-growing summer bedding such as bizzy-lizzies (Impatiens), lobelia, begonia semperflorens, salvia and antirrhinum in a heated greenhouse or in an indoor propagator, provided you have somewhere warm to grow them on until it is warm enough to plant them out. There are a couple of annual climbers that can also be sown now: the cup-and-saucer vine (*Cobaea scandens*) and the Chilean glory flower (*Eccremocarpus*). There is still plenty of time to plant sweet pea seeds if you haven't already done so – they can even be sown directly into the ground now but be warned that mice are very partial to their seed!



- Start off dahlia tubers this month, indoors or in the greenhouse, to provide shoots for cuttings. Examine the tubers and discard any that have rotted and if they have shrivelled, plunge them into tepid water overnight to plump them up. Plant the tubers shallowly into a tray of damp peat so the tops of the tubers are just covered. Once the new shoots appear, they need plenty of light.

- If you have any potted spring bulbs outside, you may like to bring them inside to encourage them to flower early. Care should be taken to make the transition from outdoors to indoors gradual so avoiding massive temperature changes – use a porch or well-lit frost-free shed to acclimatise the bulbs. Similarly if your indoor bulbs such as hyacinths have finished flowering then they can be acclimatised and put back outside.

- A mild spell in February is a good time to plant a new hedge of yew, hawthorn, privet, hornbeam or beech. Prepare the ground for planting by clearing away any weeds and digging a trench where the hedge is to go, turn the soil over and dig in plenty of well-rotted manure or compost. More exciting hedging plants include Escallonia, cotoneaster, rosa rugosa, and snowberry (*Symphoricarpos*) – all give flowers and/or berries to offer some interest.

- There is still time to get your potatoes under way – buy them and place them in a shallow box in a light frost-free position to encourage the sprout to shoot, before planting next month.

## PLANTS TO ENJOY IN FEBRUARY

Aucuba, Callicarpa, Cotoneaster, Chinodoxa, corkscrew hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Crocus, Daphne mezereum and odora, Eranthis, heather (*Erica carnea*), Garrya elliptica, witch hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*), Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*), Iris reticulata, winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*), Lonicera fragrantissima, Mahonia, grape hyacinth (*Muscari*), Pernettya, Pyracantha, Skimmia japonica, wintersweet (*Chimonanthus*)

## DIANA'S CHOICE

The first of the spring bulbs to appear each year is the snowdrop or galanthus, giving such promise of things to come in the garden with its gently nodding white head. There are several species and numerous varieties ranging in height from 3 to 12 inches. A few varieties have double flowers and the bulbs will return each year if planted in an undisturbed area of the garden. The bulbs are planted in the early autumn or can be bought ready growing (or 'in the green') in the first part of the year. Large clumps can be divided after flowering for planting elsewhere to give a carpet of soft white flowers.

