

WHAT TO DO IN THE GARDEN THIS MONTH: JANUARY

The arrival of the New Year traditionally heralds the coldest month of the year but also the promise of things to come in the garden and time to plan. Browse through gardening books and seed catalogues and decide what changes would give your garden a lift and make more enjoyable – think of your garden as an outdoor living area to relax in when the weather permits.

TASK LIST

On fine days walk around the garden and make sure that all is as it should be i.e. tree ties are intact, tree stakes are firm in the ground, plants have not come loose with frost or wind, and remaining piles of dead leaves are cleared away to the compost heap. Brush off any snow from evergreen shrubs and conifers as its weight may well cause damage to branches.

Plant out roses – either pot grown or bare rooted - as long as the ground is not frozen or water-logged. It is considered unwise to plant new roses where old ones have been, but there is 'friendly mycorrhizal fungi' available which alleviates this problem. The fungi attach themselves to the roots and create a second root system to greatly improve the growing conditions of the plant. An added bonus is the plant should never require any further feeding.

Sow sweet peas and put in a heated propagator or on a warm windowsill. They have long roots and are better sown in peat pots or grow tubes so they can be easily transplanted without disturbing the roots. Once the seeds have germinated they can be moved to a cold greenhouse or cold frame. Other flower seeds that can be started in a similar way are half-hardy annuals which are slow to grow such as antirrhinums, begonia semperflorens and lobelia.

Place cloches over strawberries for an early crop and force rhubarb by placing a large upturned pot, bucket or special forcing jar over the crowns. Sow broad beans in pots and place in a cold frame for planting out in the spring. Early salad crops such as lettuce, radish and spring onions can also be sown under gentle heat and moved to the greenhouse once germinated.

If the surface of your ornamental pool has frozen over, and especially if it contains fish, break the ice with care – use boiling water rather than a hammer as the shock waves could kill the fish. Keep the pond netted to catch any stray dead leaves. Any water features should have their pumps and filters removed to prevent damage from frost.

As most of the seeds and berries will have gone from the garden it is now important to keep the bird feeders and tables regularly topped up. High fat food such as fat balls, cheese, nuts and meat are ideal on tables plus some fruit on the ground for robins, blackbirds and thrushes. Also ensure that the birds have fresh drinking water, especially when conditions are freezing.

If you haven't already done so, spray fruit trees and soft fruit to kill off any insects and their eggs that may have been over-wintering in the bark. To prune autumn-fruiting raspberries, cut back all the canes to just above ground level. Currants and gooseberries can also be pruned now.

PLANTS TO ENJOY IN JANUARY

Aucuba, Callicarpa, Cotoneaster, Chimonanthus (wintersweet), Crocus, Cyclamen, Daphne mezereum, Eranthis, Euonymus, Galanthus snowdrop), Garrya elliptica, Hamamelis mollis (witch hazel), Jasminum nudiflorum (winter jasmine), Lonicera frsagrantissima, Mahonia, Pernettya, Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis' (winter-flowering cherry), Pyracantha, Skimmia japonica, Sorbus (mountain ash), Viburnum bodnantense, fragrans and tinus

DIANA'S CHOICE

Few plants flower in January but one that gives delight every year is the helleborus group of hardy perennials. The earliest variety to flower is the helleborus niger or Christmas rose which usually appears in January – you may have to cut away old leaves to expose the nodding, saucer-shaped flowers which are white or pink-tinged. They can grow to a height and width of 45cm (1.5ft) and grow best in partial shade and good, deep soil.

