



ALLOTMENTS & GARDENS ASSOCIATION SALISBURY

December monthly planner of jobs to do

Thank goodness December comes but once a year. The days are dismally short and the weather the very worst of the year - either cold and wet or unpleasantly mild and wet, and rarely any of the bright winter glory that arrives in January and February. The garden seems to slump into a sulky heap. But it is all a test of mettle and the garden can be manipulated to rise above December drabness with the judicious use of colour, such as a bowl of cyclamens or winter pansies, the worst of winter is defied.

BASIC GARDENING JOBS

- **Apples** store best at about 2-3°C with some humidity but kept from freezing. The two biggest problems are drying out and rotting. It is a good idea to check them at least weekly and any with the slightest sign of damage should be either eaten or put out for the birds.
- **Gather** greenery to use as indoor decorations
- **Sort** seed packets - organise into types and discard any out-of-date packs.
- **Target** tough perennial weeds still going strong - they will now be much easier to spot and dig up. Remove as much of the roots as possible to help prevent regrowth.
- **While** it's quiet on the gardening front, spend some time planning any changes you want to make to your borders next year. Look back at recent photos if possible and note any areas that you'd like to improve. You could even draw up a simple plan showing the colours and sizes of plants you'd like to add in spring. You can also get ahead and order seeds now, while the best choices are still available.
- **Deadhead** winter flowering pansies for continued flowering.
- **Mulch** around hellebores with bark chips to help keep leaves clean.
- **Cut** shoots of winter flowering shrubs and bring indoors. These will flower in the warmth of the house for Christmas.
- **Sow** pelargonium seeds in a propagator set at 18-20°C. The growth of these plants takes a while, so if you want blooms in the first year, sow now for sufficient time to grow and flower.
- **Root** cuttings are an excellent way to propagate some clump-forming herbaceous plants. These have roots that, when cut, will readily produce new shoots from dormant buds and develop into new plants. Suitable candidates include echinops, crepis, oriental poppies, acanthus and Japanese anemones. Root cuttings should be taken over winter when the plant is dormant. Simply dig up part or all the clump, cut off a few large roots, then replant it quickly before it dries out - it should settle back in well, unharmed by the experience. Trim off one or two of the thickest roots and then cut into 5cm lengths. You should see little white buds along the root sections. Lay slim roots horizontally on the surface of a tray of compost, a few centimetres apart. Cover the roots with more compost and if necessary, weigh it down with a layer of grit. Water well, then place the tray in a sheltered spot outdoors. Expect new shoots to appear in spring.
- **Check** stored bulbs for signs of rot or disease and discard those affected.
- **Harvest** remaining root crops and prepare ground for spring.
- **Tidy** the shed and clean pots ready for next spring.
- **A** mulch of manure or garden compost will not only improve your soil's structure and nutrient levels, but it will also add micro-organisms that are vital for healthy plant growth. The vegetable plot needs these more than permanently planted borders, because regular cropping depletes the soil of organic matter and nutrients. Simply spread the composted organic matter on the soil surface where worms and bugs will drag it into the root zone over the coming weeks, so your soil is in good shape for planting in spring.
- **Drain** outdoor water pipes if you can, then use bubble wrap or pipe insulation tubes around all exposed pipes and taps. Tie all in securely and keep it there until late spring.
- **Remove** leaves that have gathered on netted ponds.

- **Choose** chilli, lobelia, and snapdragon seeds, ready to start sowing under glass next month.
- **Order** seed potatoes - ask the supplier to dispatch nearer planting time.
- **All** Christmas trees will last through the season, looking fresh and with less needle drop, if you take time to prepare them and position them in the right place. Even the 'no needle drop' trees do better when they've been conditioned a bit like cut flowers. Saw a few centimetres off the end of the trunk. Stand the tree in water for a few hours or overnight. This allows the tree to draw up water, helping it to retain the needles for longer. Place the tree well away from any source of heat.
- **Local** authorities will collect old Christmas trees for free if you put them outside on the designated day. Alternatively, you can compost your tree. Cut it with loppers or use a shredder to make small pieces that can be added in layers to the compost heap. You can also use the shavings as a mulch around trees or shrubs - but not on flowerbeds.
- **Stake** newly planted trees (with the post facing into any prevailing wind) it helps prevent root rock and allows straighter growth as the tree establishes. Checking staked trees regularly over winter reduces the risk of damage through ties that are too loose or tight, or posts that are broken or loose. Ties that have been left on too long will constrict the thickening trunk, and longer stakes can act like a rubbing post when the wind blows the tree against it, so remove stakes and ties when their job is done.
- **Many** woody plants, like fruit trees and shrubs, are supplied from the nursery with bare roots during the winter dormant period. Get them in the ground as soon as you can. First soak the roots thoroughly, then plant in well-prepared ground. Look for the soil mark and plant to the same depth as it was at the nursery. IF the ground is frozen or the site not quite ready, heel them into loose soil or compost, cover the roots and lay them down so that the branches are not vulnerable to the drying affects of the wind. You can delay planting for a few weeks like this, but they must be in the ground before the buds begin to swell.
- **With** fewer sunny days and damper weather, it can be easy to think that winter pots don't need watering as much, but they can get surprisingly dry when we haven't had any rain for a while. Check if the surface of the compost feels dry before you water though.
- **Woody** material is much quicker to rot down if it's been shredded first. You can use it fresh on paths or mix it into the compost bin with green material, such as kitchen waste. If you haven't got a shredder, chop it up with secateurs instead.
- **Obelisks** and arches can become unstable after strong winds, so check them and resecure if needed to make sure they don't fall over and take your climbing plants with them.
- **The** best way to help the environment is to reuse what you've already got rather than buying new. Plant labels are an easy win as the old writing can be cleaned off with wire wool or a scouring pad.
- **Keep** your secateurs in top condition by cleaning the blades after use with wire wool to remove any plant sap. Use an oily cloth to keep them lubricated and sharpen if needed with a sharpening stone.
- **Weeds** will continue to grow over winter and although numbers may be small, they can still set seed. Continue to pull up any you find on a regular basis.
- **Tackle** nuisance weeds such as bind weed when you are doing winter digging.
- **Build** raised beds and compost bins for next year.
- **Dig** a 30cm deep trench for runner beans where you intend to grow them. Fill over winter with waste you would normally put on the compost heap and cover this with soil in spring.

PESTS & DISEASES

- **Blackspot** is a common fungal disease of roses, producing large dark spots on the foliage. In severe cases, the leaves fall early, and the plant's vigour is greatly reduced, although it will still bear some flowers. Regular use of a rose fungicide is effective, but the best strategy is remove and destroy affected leaves as soon as possible and be fastidious in picking up any that fall. If buying new roses, look for blackspot-resistant varieties. Still even these will eventually succumb if you have other infected roses nearby.
- **Dark** brown, roundish spots are fungal disease called hellebore leaf spot. Remove and destroy affected leaves to prevent spreading of infection.
- **Find** snails hiding under pots, inside wall crevices and under the rims of raised beds and pots. They will hibernate while it is cold to avoid freezing, so now is the time to collect, gather and dispose of them.
- **The** pink pustules of this fungus are common. Pruning can spread it, so cut back to healthy buds, avoid wet conditions, and wipe your pruning tools with methylated spirit before putting them away.

- **Treat** potted citrus for scale insect and remove sooty mould from leaves.
- **Pigeons** can strip brassicas, so make sure you've covered your plants with netting to keep them out.
- **Rabbits** and deer can both be more of a problem as they come into gardens during winter while natural food resources are low. Fencing will help keep them out.
- **Black spots** on pansies and violas is a fungal problem. Avoid growing them in the same place next year.
- **The** fungal spores that cause peach leaf curl are spread by rain during the winter and spring. Help prevent this occurring by covering your tree with a plastic-covered frame or by bringing potted trees into a cold greenhouse.
- **Parsnips** can be harvested at any time of winter, but if your soil lies wet, they may develop canker, which is a brown rot around the shoulders. It can be cut off but reduces what you can eat.
- **Aphids** often arrive in the autumn, usually grey or white ones. They are most troublesome on brassicas growing in less fertile or dry soil, so the two remedies are thicker compost mulch and some watering. As your soil improves every year, you should find these aphids less common.

WILDLIFE

- **One** of the greatest gardening pleasures is watching the birds come to feeders placed around the garden. You should provide a range of treats for them, including sunflower seeds, fat balls, nuts, and grain. Also provide a shallow dish of water which should be kept topped up and unfrozen during cold weather. The important thing to remember when feeding birds is that once you start, you need to keep up a regular supply. During cold spells and when other sources of food are scarce, the birds will expend valuable energy flying to the feeder, which is wasted if there is nothing for them when they arrive. It is better to provide a smaller but constant supply than an irregular burst of largesse.
- **Prepare** nest boxes ready for next spring's nesting activity. If you leave them, pests such as mites can build up and affect the young chicks, so clean the box by brushing out the old nest material. Sterilise with boiling water, but don't use any cleaning chemicals. Nest boxes rot over time, so make sure the perches are secure, the structure is good, and the roof is watertight before fixing back into place. Birds explore potential sites early so get this done now to gain feathered resident's next spring.
- **Before** lighting a bonfire check the heap for hibernating toads, hedgehogs and other animals.
- **Bundle** together stems which have been cut from herbaceous perennials and leave them in a sheltered, hidden place. Anything from ladybirds and other beetles to small mammals will take shelter here, being on hand to tackle early pest infestations in spring.
- **Don't** cut mature ivy back, where possible, as the flowers provide a fantastic source of nectar and pollen for late-flying insects. Later in the season the berries will provide food for birds, while the leaves offer roosting and hibernation shelter for many species, including the brimstone butterfly.
- **Plant** up a pot of nectar-rich crocuses now to feed hungry queen bumblebees in spring. Place the pot in a sunny spot and keep it watered.
- **Avoid** turning your compost bin or heap as it may be sheltering hibernating wildlife such as hedgehogs and other small mammals as well as reptiles, amphibians and even bumblebees. Wait until April when disturbance will be minimal.
- **Ladybirds** will start gathering en masse under bark, in window frames and sheds/garages to spend the winter in torpor, while most beetles will be retreating underground or under logs. Many insects (even some small amphibians) will overwinter in long grass and leaving an area of your lawn overgrown can be immensely valuable to their hibernation. If you can create a log pile, even better. If you're working in the garden, you may dig up some small brown plastic-looking cases. These are the pupae of moths and beetles and if you re-bury them where you find them, they should pupate next year.

VEGETABLES/HERBS

- **Protect** celeriac which is not fully hardy by mulching thickly with straw when there are heavy frosts.
- **Harvest** kale by stripping the foliage from the central stem.
- **Growing** onions from seed rather than sets gives more choice of varieties- it's how exhibition onion growers do it. The summer onion crop must be sown this month. Pick out the seedling as soon as they can be handled and grow them on in the greenhouse before planting into your veg patch.
- **Pull** the earth up around the base of spring cabbages, broccoli and cauliflower with a hoe or trowel to provide protection from strong winds in winter. Remove yellow leaves to keep plants healthy and tie taller veg like Brussel sprouts to canes for extra support.

- **Vegetables** that you're storing, such as root crops, squash, garlic, and onions, get progressively more vulnerable to rot as the weeks go on, even when kept somewhere cool and dark. So, check them and regularly handle each one to make sure they're not going soft, and get some light on them so you can see if they've developed spots or other signs of rot on their skin. Onions for example, can look perfect, but be soft when pressed. Use the softer ones as soon as possible but discard any that have started to rot.
- **Brussels** sprouts taste sweeter when picked after some frost, so you can start harvesting this month. Simply snap each sprout cleanly from the stem by twisting it sharply downwards. Sprouts are always best eaten straight after picking, so only take as many as you need. The rest will stay tightly budded on the plant for some weeks to come. To prepare them, simply clean off the outer leaves and trim the base, then steam them gently. They will also keep for a few days in the salad drawer of the fridge or can be frozen for use later.
- **Sow** mustard greens for salads - grow in the greenhouse or inside on a bright windowsill.
- **Continue** to force chicory to make tender, blanched heads (chicons) for winter salads. Cut back growth to leave short stubs. Put a bucket over the top, block out light and put in a frost-free place, such as a garage or shed. In several weeks, tender white chicons will have formed and you can cut at the base and repeat.
- **Garlic** likes full sun and free - draining soil that has been enriched with well-rotted manure or garden compost. If your soil is heavy, plant the cloves into shallower holes or start them off in modules.
- **Cover** hardy salad crops such as Lettuce 'Winter Gem' with a light fleece.
- **Leeks** can provide crops from summer right through winter and into spring, if you sow successive batches of early, mid - and late - season varieties. These then need to be harvested in the right order, because the earliest varieties don't keep as well outside in the coldest winter temperatures, but the later varieties are perfectly hardy. To harvest, use a fork to loosen the soil, then lift the plant out with its roots intact. Wash off the soil in a bucket, then trim off the roots and the long strappy leaves. The debris can be put on the compost heap. Leeks can be used instead of onions in soups, stews, and stir-fries. They can be stored in the fridge for a few days and any excess can be frozen.
- **Having** cut off all the woody stems on asparagus, pull up any weeds and spread 2-3cm of compost, or 5cm on light soils as a winter mulch.
- **For** an earlier crop of rhubarb insulate the crown with straw and cover with an upturned dustbin or flowerpot to exclude light.
- **You** can still sow herbs in your kitchen in pots. Make sure you pick the sunniest windowsill or use an indoor grow light.
- **Sow** a box or gutter pipe of pea tips inside, ready for salads, soups, or risottos at Christmas. Scatter the seed across the length and width of the compost and put them anywhere cool, but in good light. Sown now, you can pick straight from the gutter pipe - no garden required.
- **Sow** hardy peas under fleece for an early crop next year.

TREES/SHRUBS/BULBS/FLOWERS

- **Look** for dead or damaged branches on shrubs and prune out.
- **If** you live in an area prone to frost, make sure your dahlia tubers are safely dug out now. Once gently prised out, dry off and pack into an open tray full of compost until spring or you can leave the tubers in and mulch with leaves and compost.
- **Start** amaryllis (hippeastrum) bulbs into growth now for spectacular trumpet flowers in a couple of months. Place on a windowsill in good light, then water and feed as it grows. After flowering, cut off the pent stem, but continue feeding for flowers next year.
- **Get** tulips in the ground asap and you'll have a great display in spring. Plant them deeply at three times the height of the bulb.
- **December** is the best time to prune Japanese maples, walnuts, Oriental hellebores and Epimediums.
- **Pinch** out the growing tip of sweet pea seedlings once they have two pairs of leaves.
- **After** flowering dig up chrysanth stools and place them into boxes before transferring them on to the warming bench in the greenhouse to start them into growth then hopefully take cuttings in January or February. The chrysanths are prone to a disease called white rust so the stools need to be sprayed with a good fungicide every few weeks as a prevention.

FRUIT

- **Grapevines** need pruning every year and during the vine's winter dormancy is the best time to do it, cutting back to the most basic structure. Home-grown vines often have far more bunches of grapes, resulting in small fruit of low quality, so the secret is to prune hard. Reduce the side-shoots then cut back the remaining ones to just two buds.
- **Keep** your apple trees healthy and improve cropping by doing some winter pruning. You'll need secateurs, long-handled loppers and a pruning saw, with the blades freshly cleaned and sharpened. Start by removing any branches that are damaged or diseased or have grown into each other. Next, thin out any shoots that are strongly vertical and shorten the whippy side shoots slightly. The horizontal branches will bear the most fruit, so make sure they have plenty of light above them. Discard all the prunings and old windfalls to reduce the disease risk.
- **Prune** gooseberry bushes and red and white currants by shortening the new growth at the tip of each main branch by half and cut inside shoots to within two buds of the main stem. Prune blackcurrants if you did not do so in summer, by cutting back a third of the stem to just above ground level. Remove the oldest and weakest first, along with any emerging at a low angle.

GREENHOUSES/COLD FRAMES

- **Some** of your greenhouse plants may need some extra protection from the cold as the winter sets in. A max/min thermometer that measures the highest and lowest temperatures over 24 hours will give you the best data to judge when to act. Fleecing vulnerable plants helps to protect them, but it's best to get greenhouse heaters working too. You'll still need to keep an eye on the thermometer of course. Keep a record of your readings and the effect of protection measures on your plants. It's valuable information for future years.
- **Pick** dead leaves off plants to avoid the build up of hidden pests.
- **Spread** out pots to allow air flow and prevent fungal problems.
- **Fill** in any gaps in windows or doors and check for cold drafts.
- **Water** plants but do so sparingly and less often than in milder months.
- **On** bright, sunny, winter days, the temperatures in the greenhouse can rise dramatically. This causes stress to plants that have acclimatised for the winter. Keep the doors and side vents shut, but use the roof vents to ventilate, as they won't cause damaging draughts. The gentle air exchange also helps to reduce the likelihood of fungal disease building up among the plants. Shut the vents again before the light drops so that some residual heat can build up, saving your night heating costs.
- **Adding** a layer of mulch to your greenhouse border now will condition the soil ready for next year's crop. Most organic matter is acidic, so check your soil's pH and if it is low, add some garden lime to the soil first. Next fork through the surface, water, then spread on a layer of mulch at least 5cm thick. Composted manure is best, but any garden compost will help. Old growing bag compost or spent compost from pots is better used outside where winter temperatures will knock out any overwintering greenhouse pests. By the time you plant next year's crops in early spring, the mulch layer will have composted into the surface, leaving a perfect crumbly tilth.
- **Check** that semi-ripe and hardwood cuttings, and other items in cold frames don't dry out.

HOUSE PLANTS

- **Providing** the right conditions for your festive house plants is the key to success. Poinsettias enjoy warm living rooms with no draughts and good, but not harsh light. Normal room temperatures are ideal for hippeastrum as long as plants are receiving plenty of light. Cyclamen, hyacinths and paperwhite narcissus prefer it cooler at 13-18°C, so a porch or conservatory suits them better.