

Your garden in winter

Gardener, if you listen, listen well:

Plant for your winter pleasure, when the months

Dishearten; plant to find a fragile note

Touched from the brittle violin of frost.

Vita Sackville West

A very sensible piece of advice from one of the 20th century's greatest gardeners. From November, when most trees have shed their leaves, until the first flush of fresh green leaves in March, there are many weeks when nature appears to be dormant. Gone are the bright and gaudy clothes of summer, replaced by softer, gentler hues enriched by the low winter sun.

There is much beauty in the winter landscape for those who choose to look. Many of us however, don't live in the country but if we plan it so, our gardens can be a source of great enjoyment. A quieter, gentle pleasure than the exultations of summer, but a pleasure nonetheless.

A good starting point is evergreen structure. A good skeleton of evergreen shrubs is a must for all gardens. Aim to get a balance of one third evergreen to two thirds deciduous. Evergreen doesn't just mean green. Variegated and gold-leaved shrubs add warmth on a cold winter's day, and can brighten up a



dull corner of the garden. If some of those shrubs also carry berries, or flower in the winter, so much the better. Try holly, cotoneaster and skimmia for berries, or camellia, daphne, mahonia, osmanthus or sarcococca for winter flowers.

Most of us can only fit one or two trees in our garden, so why not choose one that gives year-round enjoyment? Many have beautiful bark, some have berries that persist over winter (eg Sorbus or Malus), whilst others even flower. Prunus serrula, for example, has polished and peeling mahogany-red bark that is so tactile that you just can't keep your hands off it! From late autumn until March Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis' produces a cloud of soft white blossom which fades to pink, only stopping if the weather is particularly cold.

For the lazy gardener like me, much enjoyment can be gained from the effects of frost on seedheads that I have left rather than tidy. Agapanthus, allium, honesty (lunaria), coneflower (echinacea), sea holly (eryngium), and poppies all have striking seedheads that are guaranteed to make an impact in the winter garden.