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Sun puts a spring in the step!

Last weekend, and I hesitate to get too excited about it just yet, there was some actual sunshine! With apologies to those who perhaps didn't get any decent weather (the south-west, I'm looking at you in particular) I can confirm it was a joy to be outside without getting cold or wet!

I'm not sure I even did much that was hugely productive, although I did weed and mulch the veg beds. Even without anything growing in them right now, they at least look neat and tidy! One of them is in dappled shade under a neighbour's tree so I've found that leafy veg do better there – and one I shall try this year is kale – inspired by our feature on superfoods to grow, starting on page 20. It should be perfectly happy there and it's a food that has won me over in recent years. The fact it's so healthy is a bonus!

Don't miss our round-up of some of the best spring gardens to visit (page 12). It's a great time of year to have a day trip and get some inspiration from some of the magnificent visitor gardens dotted around the UK. Not only will you see lots of flowers in bloom right now, you'll see planting schemes in place for later in the year – and you can go home and pinch the best ideas! Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, after all...

And as ever there is so much more in the UK's only weekly gardening magazine to help you get your best-ever garden. Have a great gardening week.

Garden News Editor

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Our cover star: Carol Klein

Now's the perfect time to divide and share your treasured perennials. Carol explains all you need to know from page 24.

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HOW ARE YOU DOING?

New survey will help parks and gardens with climate change, reports Ian Hodgson

Harlow Town Park in Essex is a historic garden

A tree felled by Storm Eunice in 2022 in Bressingham Gardens, Norfolk

PHOTOS: HISTORIC ENGLAND, GAP PHOTOS: GARDEN ORGANIC: CHESTNUT NURSERY: FOREST GARDEN, ORGANIX: ECO CROPS: GREENMAN

Owners and managers of thousands of historic UK green spaces are being invited to take part in research to help them deal with environmental shifts.

Independent public conservation body Historic England, supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), has launched a new UK-wide survey to evaluate how climate change is affecting these sites.

Although there are more than 2,700 registered historic landscapes, parks and gardens on various statutory registers in the UK, there is currently little guidance available for owners and managers to help them adapt and prepare for changing environmental issues (see below).

The research will explore how these landscapes are being maintained and managed in response to current threats, with the ambition of developing a plan to guide managers and owners and the resources they will need. Outcomes will also inform the NLHF's future approach to supporting historic landscapes, parks and gardens.

Since 1994, the funding body has awarded more than £2.2 billion to 5,100 land, sea and nature projects across the UK.

In January's Storm Goretti, the garden at St Michael's Mount in Cornwall lost 80% of its trees, while Trewithen Gardens lost 25% of its mature trees, some around 250 years old. Historic gardens, such as Chatsworth, Sissinghurst, Powis Castle, Hillsborough Castle, Princes Street Gardens and Kew Gardens employ more than 32,000 people and contribute £2.9 billion annually to the UK economy, just from international visitors alone.

Drew Bennellick, NLHF's head of land, sea and nature policy, said: "The UK is the home of gardening and our historic landscapes, parks and gardens are world renowned. We know some larger organisations are actively engaged in mitigation and adaptation for the future, but we want to find out if owners and managers are responding in a planned and managed way and if not, what help and support they might need."

A report is set to be published in April using information submitted by mid-March, eventually to be made accessible on the NLHF website.

■ **Visit *heritagefund.org.uk***

WHAT IS BEING ASKED?

The survey aims to gauge the level of commitment and experience of garden managers in planning for climate change and the type and degree of damage – such as flooding, tree damage, fire, flood, drought, erosion and pests and diseases – they are observing to their buildings, structures and features. It also wants to understand any changes being made to address problems and the various barriers affecting or influencing decisions.

The Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park

Seeds leaving the library

Seed relay marks 50 years for charity

A package of historic vegetable seeds is travelling the UK to celebrate the 50th anniversary of sustainable gardening charity Garden Organic (GO) while also promoting community seed sharing.

GO's Heritage Seed Library holds the National Collection of Heritage Vegetables, accessible to their members. The seed relay – believed to be the first of its kind in the UK – started in Bocking, Essex, in October and has since travelled to institutions throughout England. At each stop-off point, 'seed champions' take a packet of seed to grow on and eventually save, passing remaining seeds to the next destination. The relay's planned route takes it through Wales from St David's Day on March 1, then to north

Mangave makes a moonshot

A summer succulent surprised garden centre staff recently by producing a 1.5m tall flower spike in midwinter.

The mangave 'Moonglow', a rosette-like succulent in the agave or century plant family, sprang into life at Chestnut Nursery in Poole in Dorset, producing a stout stem from the centre of the rosette that ended in creamy-green flowers.

'Moonglow', with its attractive, grey-green red-spotted leaves, is one of a range of USA-produced mangaves rising in popularity as UK gardeners seek drought-tolerant plants for summer gardens. After flowering the flowering rosette dies, but sideshoots continue to grow.

Richard Holman, nursery supervisor said: "While mangave is a magnificent, architectural, low-maintenance plant for exotic and tropical-style gardens, the secret to success is to grow it in pots of well-drained compost and bring plants into a frost-free greenhouse or conservatory in autumn, ensuring the compost is kept on the dry side over winter."

Staff with the magnificent mangave

east England and into Scotland by early summer. A celebration will also take place in Ireland.

"Our seed relay is highlighting the vital importance of sharing seed, so that it survives," said GO CEO Fiona Taylor. "The best way to conserve seeds for future generations is to sow them, save them and pass them on."

■ **Visit *gardenorganic.org.uk***

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Garden OF THE WEEK

Gardener: Chris Ensell
Location: Leicester
Size: 35 x 11m
Soil: Sandy
Aspect: North-west facing
Been in garden: Three years
Further info: *instagram.com/thejunglelookuk*

Imagine you're on holiday when eating al fresco!

Exotic ambitions

Inspired by tropical travels, one gardening enthusiast transformed a sandy Leicestershire plot into a colourful, plant-packed paradise for all ages

Words Geoff Hodge
Photos Neil Hepworth

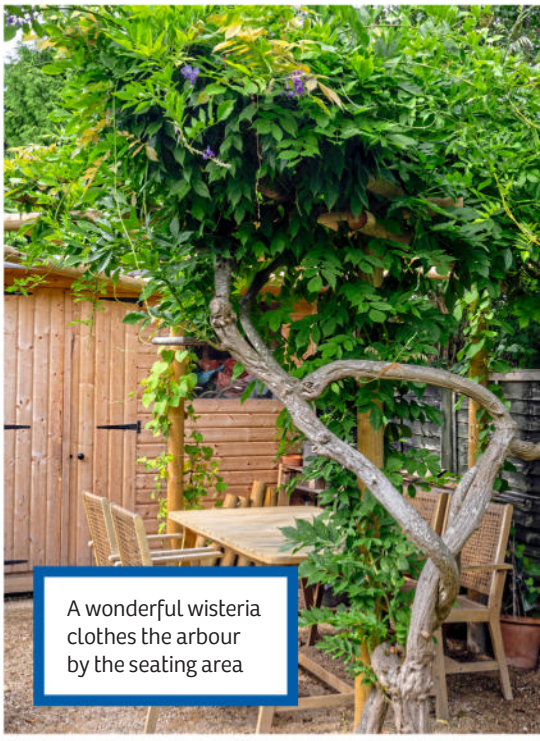
In deepest Leicestershire lies a jewel of a garden, boasting an extraordinary collection of rare and unusual plants with a jungle theme – although that's not to say there aren't more common plants too. "It's all about achieving the look and feel, with a combination of the rare and not so rare. Anything that suits the bill and is cost effective makes it into the garden," says Chris Ensell.

As well as being a haven for a wide range of exotic plants, this is very much a family garden. "While it's predominantly me that cares for the plants, with help from my father-in-law Mike when I need it, my wife Annie and the kids thoroughly enjoy it too." To keep the children engaged with the garden, there's an area set aside for them to play with a wooden teepee and a Wendy house.

Chris and Annie have demanding jobs; they are the husband-and-wife photographers behind Bloom Weddings, providing those vital real-life moments when couples get married. "As we both work from home when not on the

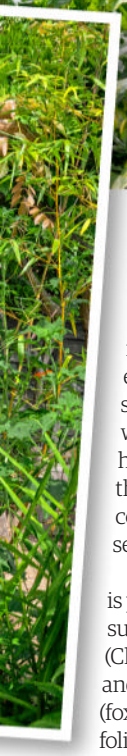
An ordinary suburban garden has been transformed into an otherworldly paradise

Alstroemeria, alliums and dahlias sit underneath the ensete, tetrapanax and dicksonia



A wonderful wisteria clothes the arbour by the seating area

The greenhouse is the heart of the garden, helping Chris overwinter plants more easily



road photographing, it's important for us to have somewhere to escape to, somewhere we can use for our lunches, evenings etc. It gives me headspace, somewhere to clear my head when I want to get out of the house and switch off. I love the feeling once the garden comes to fruition and the sense of accomplishment."

The backbone of the garden is plants with big green leaves, such as *Tetrapanax papyrifer* (Chinese rice-paper plant) and *Paulownia tomentosa* (foxglove tree), variegated foliage including *Arundo donax* 'Variegata' (variegated giant reed), *Aralia elata* 'Variegata' (angelica tree), ginger lily hedychium 'Doctor Moy' and a variegated aspidistra. There's also *Phyllostachys vivax* – the

Continues over the page

Lush greenery is key, dotted with hot colour for good measure

The children's wooden teepee is a fun feature

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New compost transforms your garden...or your money back!

For many gardeners, the switch away from peat has been a frustrating one. You do everything right — sow carefully, water properly, give plants a good position — and yet results can be patchy. Weak roots, slow growth and constant feeding soon take the shine off what should be one of life's great pleasures.

That's precisely the problem experienced gardener Paul Hansord set out to solve. With decades of hands-on horticultural knowledge behind him, he knew plants don't struggle because gardeners lack skill — they struggle because their compost lets them down.

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Garden OF THE WEEK

The garden is a melting pot of unusual or rare plant selections alongside easily available stalwarts

biggest bamboo you can grow in the majority of the UK. Then the garden is dotted through with bold, bright flowers for the summer, such as dahlias, salvias and alstroemerias. "You do need to fill out the spaces with colourful and annual plants." Although Chris isn't big into colour theming – "I'm more looking for zingy colours" – he loves the combination of *Salvia involucrata* with dahlia 'Waltzing Mathilda'. For spring, he goes with tulips, picking half a dozen different varieties with bold colours within a colour theme, including 'Winnipeg' and 'Merlot'.

The Wendy house is nicely tucked away among the foliage

The spark that fired Chris's love of exotic, jungle plants came in 2018 when he and Annie went on their honeymoon to Sri Lanka and the Maldives. "While we were there, I started thinking about whether the tropical aesthetic might be possible in the UK. I then saw a feature on Philip Oostenbrink's idyllic urban jungle garden and was instantly inspired to have my own." Then, when they moved from Yorkshire in 2022, the garden came with them as the new owners had no interest in the plants, and he didn't want them to go to waste. It has now turned into a collection of quite rare and unusual plants that Chris has collected over the years.

Chris is a keen member of the 'jungle plant' community, a collection of "tropical nerds" as he calls them, all of whom are trying to outdo each other with the plants they have. "We joke that it's a bit like collecting Pokemon cards and we do 'swopsies' between each other, especially young plants raised and grown from seed. This is more cost effective than having to spend a fortune on larger plants."

Alongside the plants, the garden also features a large 10 x 8m electric heated greenhouse, which Chris calls the heart of the garden: "I couldn't achieve half of what I do in the garden without it. Lots of the tender plants are overwintered in here and it's crammed each year, and in summer I grow tomatoes after everything has been planted out."

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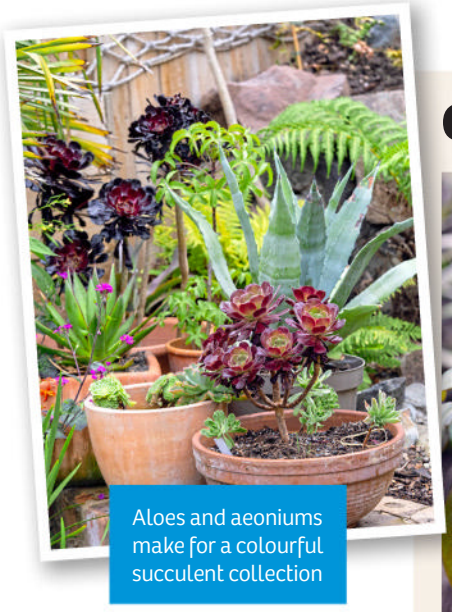
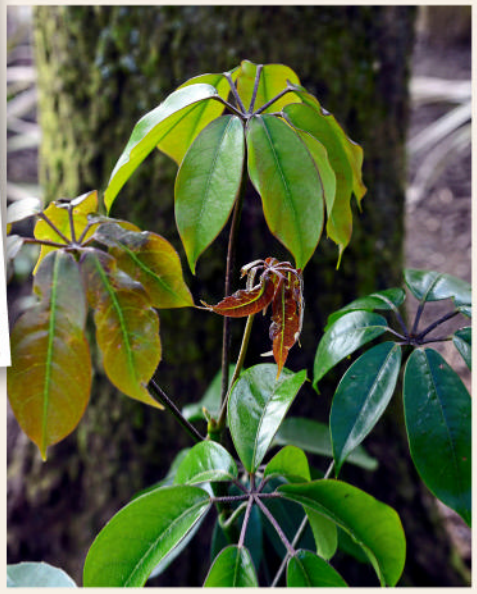


Aloes and aeoniums make for a colourful succulent collection

Garden OF THE WEEK

Chris's favourite plants...



Schefflera alpina
This evergreen's leaves often have purplish new growth. Hardy from -10C to -15C.

Trachycarpus fortunei
The Chusan palm provides brilliant structural height and is a tough plant.

Dicksonia antarctica
As Chris says, the Australian tree fern is "about as jungly-looking as it gets".

***Alstroemeria* 'Indian Summer'**
Chris says this Peruvian lily is great value, as it flowers from June to the first frosts.

PHOTOS: NEIL HEPWORTH; GAP PHOTOS; ALAMY

Lots of plants that spend most of the year in the ground, including some really large tree-like specimens, scheffleras, brugmansias and red bananas, are lifted, potted up in remarkably small pots and moved under cover. "The idea is to keep the plants just ticking over in winter, so you don't want large pots filled with a lot of compost." There is also a cold greenhouse at the bottom of the garden that's used for anything that dislikes winter wet, such as cannas, dahlias, cacti and agaves.

Other plants are protected in situ: tree ferns have straw stuffed in the crown and the trunks wrapped in hessian; the hardier Japanese bamboo, *Musa basjoo,* is protected by covering it with industrial, sewerage-sized tubes cut to length, filled with straw and topped with pallet shrink wrap. Thick mulches around plants help to protect roots from cold damage.

Although the garden comprises sandy soil, Chris has spent, and is still spending, a lot of time improving it. When he and his family first moved in, Chris practised the no-dig gardening method by covering the soil with cardboard from all the moving boxes, which he then covered with well-rotted horse manure. Further ongoing improvements include adding horse manure and local green waste and partially composted wood chip as a mulch, which is also used to help protect the roots of tender plants over winter.

As we know, gardens never stand still and Chris is looking at his future plans. On a trip down to Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens last year, he noticed their good use of repeating the same 'bulletproof' plants and he will be incorporating this, using *Hakonechloa macra, Amicia zygomeris, Salvia involucrata* and maybe cordylines. Now he has a young family, he is also looking for plants that are hardier and don't need overwintering indoors. But, as Chris says: "All that said, if something really unusual and tender comes up, I'll probably buy it!"

... and his top tips

1. Collect and grow seeds from your own plants; it'll save you pounds.
2. Do your research, as it'll save you money rather than killing plants.
3. Divide and propagate plants, for you or to share or swap.
4. You can never put enough organic matter into the soil to improve it.
5. Sit back and enjoy your garden. Chris says that he doesn't do this enough, but plans to try harder this year!

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Height: 75cm (30"). Spread: 60cm (24").

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SPRING ESCAPES: BRITAIN'S BEST GARDENS TO VISIT

From riverside daffodils and showstopping rhododendrons to cherry blossom and magical blue poppies, find the perfect place for a spring stroll or new ideas for your own patch

Words Martyn Cox

At long last, it's time to say goodbye to those winter blues and head to a great garden renowned for its spring interest. Whether you're looking for inspiration to boost the colour in your own patch or simply fancy a great day out after being cooped up indoors, there are plenty of amazing places to visit. From rhododendron retreats to daffodil destinations, here's a guide to some of the best spring zingers in Britain.

The house at Batsford Arboretum

CHEERFUL CHERRIES
Batsford Arboretum, Gloucestershire

Covering 55 acres, this arboretum contains one of the best collections of flowering cherry trees outside of Japan. There are hundreds of different varieties, including the National Collection of Sato Sakura group cherries. Commonly known as village cherries, these were bred in Japan from the late 1920s onwards and are at their best towards the end of April.

■ **Open daily, 9.30am to 5pm from Monday to Saturday and 10am to 5pm on Sunday.** ***batsarb.co.uk***

Entering the flower garden at Wentworth Estate

PLANTAHOLICS PARADISE
Wentworth Castle Gardens, South Yorkshire

Home to three National Plant Collections – species magnolias, Williamsii hybrid camellias and species rhododendrons – the grounds surrounding Wentworth Castle provide plenty of spring zing. Of species rhododendrons, there are over 300 different ones to be found here with flowers in a wide range of colours, shapes and sizes.

■ **Open daily, 10am to 5pm.** ***nationaltrust.org.uk/wentworth-castle-gardens***

RHODODENDRON RETREAT
Exbury Gardens, Hampshire

Founded in 1919, this 200-acre woodland garden on the banks of the River Beaulieu is famed for its collection of rhododendrons. Over 13,000 of them – made up of 3,000 different varieties – turn heads across a landscape traversed by 20 miles of pathway. Don't miss the Azalea Bowl, a pond surrounded by a bank of evergreen azaleas with flowers in many vibrant shades.

■ **Open daily from March 7, 10am to 5.30pm, last entry 4pm.** ***exbury.co.uk***

A spring view at Exbury Gardens

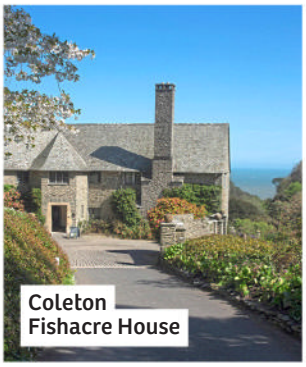
The Palm House at Kew

Cotehele is famous for daffodils

DAFFODIL DESTINATION Cotehele, Cornwall

Perched high above the River Tamar, this 1,300-acre estate boasts dazzling displays of daffodils. There are over 300 different ones planted around an attractive manor house built for the Edgcumbe family in the 15th century. Elsewhere, rhododendrons, azaleas and flowering cherries add pops of colour in the wooded valley that runs down to the banks of the river.

■ **Open daily, 10am to 5pm.** ***nationaltrust.org.uk/cotehele***


Coleton Fishacre House

COASTAL WONDER Coleton Fishacre, Devon

Built for hotelier Rupert D'Oyly Carte in 1926, an arts and crafts house stands at the top of a 24-acre valley garden. Water-loving irises and primulas thrive in the damp soil of a stream that descends gently downwards, while magnolias, camellias and a host of other spring-flowering trees and shrubs provide a colourful backdrop to grassy banks covered with bluebells and wild garlic.

■ **Open daily, 10.30am to 5pm.** ***nationaltrust.org.uk/coleton-fishacre***

Laburnum walk with allium borders at Dorothy Clive Garden

COLOURFUL QUARRY Dorothy Clive Garden, Staffordshire

Started by Colonel Harry Clive in the 1940s and named in honour of his wife, this 12-acre hillside garden boasts a 25m-long laburnum tunnel that hits its peak in May. Earlier in the season, there are plenty of bulbs, magnolias and camellias to delight, while a woodland quarry contains an impressive collection of azaleas and rhododendrons.

■ **Open daily, 10am to 4pm (5pm from April 1).** ***dorothyclivegarden.co.uk***

WONDERFUL WISTERIAS Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire

A view of Belvoir Castle

Enjoying sweeping views over the surrounding countryside, the mock gothic castle that sits at the heart of this vast estate has walls that support a number of wisterias that add colour and scent from mid-spring. A short walk away is the Japanese woodland garden that's home to magnolias, rhododendrons, cherries and hundreds of camellias.

■ **Open daily, 9.30am to 4pm (last entry 3pm).** ***belvoircastle.com***

PLANT-PACKED HOTSPOT Bodnant Garden, Conwy

Spring at Bodnant Garden

Set in the foothills of the Snowdon mountain range, Bodnant was largely developed in the early 20th century by Henry McLaren, 2nd Lord Aberconway. The 80-acre landscape contains masses of rhododendrons, camellias and a national collection of magnolias. Don't miss its set piece spectacular in late spring – a 174ft long, curved laburnum tunnel that dates to 1880.

■ **Open daily, 9.30am to 5pm (last entry 4.30pm).** ***nationaltrust.org.uk/bodnant-garden***

CAPITAL ATTRACTION Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Set on the banks of the Thames, this 300-acre garden has plenty to lure visitors in spring. There's a flowering cherry walk, azalea garden and a rhododendron dell, which was originally laid out in 1734 and contains hundreds of rare specimens. Dutch crocuses, daffodils, snake's-head fritillaries, tulips and other bulbs provide a succession of colour all season long.

■ **Open daily, 10am to 6pm (last entry 5pm).** ***kew.org***

Semi woodland planting in Branklyn Garden

BLUE POPPY MECCA Branklyn Garden, Perthshire

It might only cover two acres but this hillside garden set above the city of Perth is bursting with spring interest. Hellebores, daffodils, dog's tooth violets and cassiope shrubs get the season going, while a National Collection of rhododendrons adds colour later. A highlight for many are the 50 or so different Himalayan blue poppies that thrive in the garden's acidic soil.

■ **Open daily from March 30, 10am to 5pm.** ***nts.org.uk/branklyn-garden***

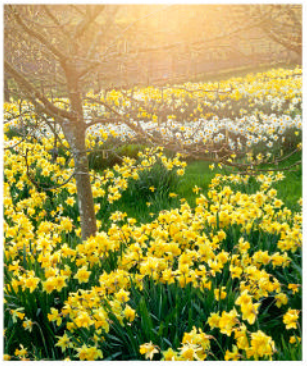
Continues over the page

Ten more spring gems

Caerhays, Cornwall

Covering 120 acres, this woodland garden houses an important collection of magnolias, camellias and rhododendrons.

■ ***visit.caerhays.co.uk***



Felley Priory, Nottinghamshire

A 16th century house overlooks a 2½ acre garden with daffodils, a bluebell wood and flowering trees and shrubs.

■ ***felleypriory.co.uk***

Dyffryn Fernant Garden, Pembrokeshire

Started from scratch in 1996, this six-acre plot in the Preseli Hills boasts an azalea bank that is full of fiery shades. Opens in April.

■ ***dyffrynfernant.co.uk***

Ardvorlich, Perth and Kinross

Clinging to the side of a gorge, the garden is home to over 170 different species of rhododendron. Open April 18 to May 31.

■ ***scotlandsgardens.org/ardvorlich/***

Rowallane Garden, County Down

Originally started in the late 19th century, this garden contains over 1,500 rhododendrons, some over 100 years old.

■ ***nationaltrust.org.uk/rowallane-garden***

Gooderstone Water Gardens, Norfolk

Candelabra primroses and other moisture-loving perennials thrive in the moist soil of this six-acre watery wonderland, which is closing on April 3.

■ ***gooderstonewatergardens.co.uk***

Crarae Woodland Garden, Argyll & Bute

Overlooking Loch Fyne, this 50-acre hillside garden is teeming with azaleas, rhododendrons, magnolias and camellias.

■ ***nts.org.uk/visit/places/crarae-garden***

Glenarm Castle, County Antrim

The ancestral seat of the Earls of Antrim is the stage for an annual tulip festival, running from May 2-4.

■ ***glenarmcastle.com***

Wimpole Estate, Cambridgeshire

An orchard of over 300 fruit trees provides a spectacular show of blossom from March to May.

■ ***nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole-estate***

Seaton Delaval, Northumberland

A sprawling estate featuring a box parterre planted with tulips, carpets of bluebells and lots of early-flowering shrubs.

■ ***nationaltrust.org.uk/seaton-delaval-hall***

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Bring South African sunshine to your garden

The country's Cape Floral Kingdom has incredible bloom diversity with around 9,000 species – and some make spectacular plants for our British gardens

Words Philip Clayton

Planning your summer garden is the perfect antidote to winter's grey days. So why not take inspiration from South Africa, with its dazzling native plants, many perfect for borders and containers, in the months ahead? Often these plants come from areas that, while well-drained, receive plenty of rain in the growing season. This translates in the UK to growing best in locations such as raised beds or containers, rock gardens, slopes or gravelly soil, so long as it's not too dry in summer or waterlogged in winter. Plants can be sensitive to cold, so protection may be needed, but don't let that put you off; many are well-suited to gardens while others enjoy summer patios or conservatories. Be it an exciting potted king protea or simply a few gazania, growing some of these plants will bring a taste of the Cape's dazzling floral riches to your own back garden this year.

Perennials and bulbous plants

Some South African perennials need little introduction. African lily (agapanthus), montbretia (crocosmia) and red-hot poker (kniphofia) are popular. Less often seen are angel's fishing rods (dierama), the most graceful of perennials, forming tufts of evergreen, grassy leaves and bell-shaped summer flowers. Best known is *D. pulcherrimum* with blooms of purple, pink or white which, held on arching wands to 1.8m tall, shiver in the lightest breeze. Then there is *D. igneum*, which is shorter at 70cm, with masses of brick-red, flared bells. Both need sun and are hardy to -10C.

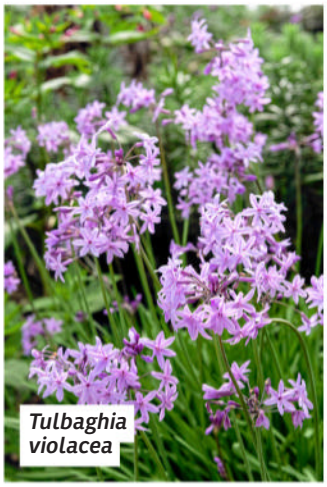
Unusual *Moraea huttonii* forms clumps of arching leaves, from which in late spring emerge erect 1m stems bearing scented, golden, iris-like flowers, 7cm across. It's quite unlike anything else and marvellous beside allium 'Purple Sensation' and bronze fennel.

If you have space by a sunny, sheltered wall, then watsonia – spectacular perennials rather like refined montbretia, with 1m spikes of tubular flowers above sword-shaped foliage in late summer – are worth a go. Easiest are orange-red *W. pillansii* and soft-pink *W. borbonica*; both need protection much below -5C. Next, two tougher choices, both hardy to -10C. River lily (*Hesperantha coccinea)* blooms brilliantly in autumn, with 50cm spikes of flowers lasting into November. Look for crimson 'Major' and pink 'Mrs Hegarty'. With river lily, as you may have guessed, summer moisture is key. In a drier, sunnier place, try society garlic (*Tulbaghia violacea*), which is like a miniature agapanthus, 40cm tall with scented mauve flowers; the plant is edible, leaves and flowers adding a garlic bite to salads.

Moraea huttonii

Dierama igneum

Watsonia borbonica



Tulbaghia violacea

PHOTOS: GAP PHOTOS

Eucomis 'Leia'

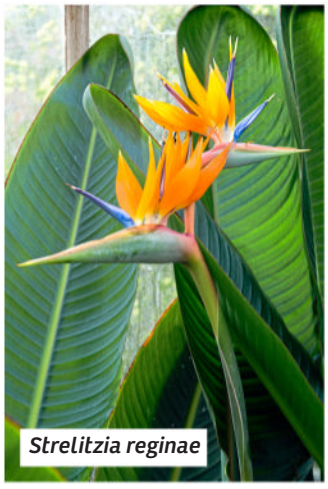
Osteospermum 'Stardust'

Pineapple lilies (eucomis) are bulbs; *E. bicolor* has strap-like foliage and from late summer, cylindrical heads of maroon-spotted, green flowers to 60cm, capped with a leafy topknot. Strikingly exotic, and great in a border or container, the only downside is the boiled cabbage smell of the flowers. Coconut-scented *E. comosa* has heads of white blooms; in 80cm tall 'Sparkling Burgundy', these and the foliage are purple-flushed. Alternatively, try rich pink 'Leia' to 30cm. All tolerate around -8C but need extra protection in pots. Another bulb, irresistible *Nerine bowdenii*, is loved for its sparkling pink flowers in mid-autumn, and there are some splendid selections such as vivid 'Isabel' and pale 'Stefanie'. Charming *N. undulata* (Flexuosa Group) 'Alba' has smaller, white blooms. Nerines love the foot of a sunny wall, conditions that suit beautiful *Amaryllis belladonna* with large, pink trumpets on naked 50cm slender stalks, again in autumn. Like the nerines, leaves arise later.

Delightful daisies

For summer pots, many daisy-flowered South Africans make perfect choices. Osteospermum are the best known, with new ones available each year for growing as bedding. These tend to be upright; ground covering kinds may be hardy in a sunny spot. Look for white 'Lady Leitrim' and purple-red 'Stardust', which survives to -5C. Even more vivid are gazania; there are named selections, such as raspberry-pink 'Christopher Lloyd', but most are seed-raised and treated as annuals. Delightful *Felicia amelloides* forms low mounds topped with yellow-eyed, blue daisies. The variegated selection is particularly fine; felicia and the gazanias may survive mild winters outdoors. For a succulent, drought-tolerant alternative, ground covering *Delosperma nubigenum* produces sheets of golden daisy-like flowers above creeping fleshy foliage – great on a sunny slope, rock garden or spilling from a pot, and easily stands -5C if sharply drained.

Nerine bowdenii 'Isabel'



Strelitzia reginae

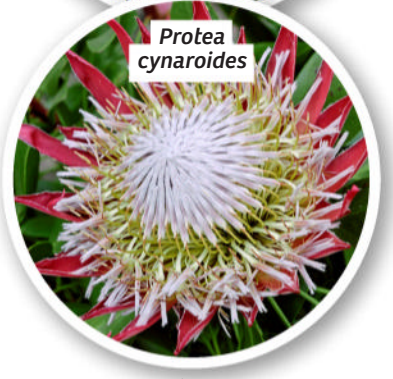
Tempting tenders

Two trademark South African plants are normally tender, but kept under glass for winter can be rewarding. Bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) is straightforward to grow, forming a large clump of oar-shaped leaves around 1.5m tall. Incredible orange and blue flowers open on tall stems in late winter and spring. It needs a large container and can be moved outside for summer. Majestic king protea (*Protea cynaroides*) is an evergreen shrub reaching around 1m, producing pink flowerheads 30cm across. It likes sun and free-draining, ericaceous compost; importantly it must be fed using specialist, phosphorus-free fertiliser. Both plants succeed in a sunny but airy conservatory, best kept above 10C.

Gazania 'Christopher Lloyd'

Delosperma nubigenum

Felicia amelloides



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A range of colourful veg will give you all your nutrients

PHOTOS: GAP PHOTOS

'Cavolo Nero'

Grow your own SUPERFOOD GARDEN

Skip the supermarket and see how easy it is to grow the most nutritious crops for heart, brain and immunity health, right on your own doorstep

Words Val Bourne

Growing your own is one of the best ways to stay healthy – and solvent, because your food is harvested by you and eaten by you and your family for little cost. Certain foods have been given superfood status because they're packed full of antioxidants. These neutralise DNA-damaging free radicals, helping to lessen the chance of heart disease, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. The chief sources are leafy vegetables, alliums, potatoes and colourful root crops. Colourful foods are particularly high in antioxidants, so grow as many as you possibly can.

The three best superfoods and how to grow them

Winter squash

'Sunshine'

These colourful squashes are harvested in early autumn when the stalk has turned corky, but they can't be eaten fresh at that stage. You need to store them in a frost-free place for at least six weeks so that the starch turns to sugar as the temperatures drop. Leave them outdoors at first, stalk facing downwards, on a slatted bench or table. If the stalk faces upwards, water collects and the squash can rot. After six weeks or so, they develop a nutty flavour.

'Crown Prince'

If you're in a warmer part of the country the best pear-shaped butternut squash is 'Hunter'. British plant breeder Tozer Seeds has developed varieties suited to cooler areas of the UK. My favourite is its F1 'Sunshine' because it produces delicious round orange squashes. This one's available from Kings Seeds. The similar looking 'Uchiki Kuri', also a kind of Japanese kabocha type squash, matures a little later on.

Heritage American squash varieties are often grey-skinned and the one to go for is 'Crown Prince'. It's more modestly sized than 'Blue Hubbard', which could feed an army. These grey-skinned squashes store longer than the orange-skinned varieties, but the thinner skin is more vulnerable to frost, so store them carefully.

Winter squashes are frost tender and need warm growing conditions, so they can't go outside until June. Sow the large oval seeds in April, one per 9cm pot, but don't lay the seeds flat onto the compost surface. Put them in vertically because the seeds are less likely to rot. When the plant has some true leaves, move it up a pot size. Squashes love nitrogen, so dress them with chicken manure after planting. Their chestnut-flavoured flesh is packed with vitamins. A maintains vision, C repairs body tissues and B6 helps red blood cell formation. Vitamin C also helps iron absorption.

Kale

All leafy vegetables keep you healthy, but the easiest and most useful of all is black Tuscan kale, also known as 'Cavolo Nero' or 'Nero di Toscana'. You can harvest the leaves individually from October until late March, so this kale pre-empts most winter brassicas by a couple of months. This tall upright brassica, which can reach 1.2m in height, has long linear leaves and a tall stem. It will need netting against bird damage.

Sow individual seeds into modular trays containing 20 cells in early spring, a system that works well for all brassicas. Once the roots have reached the bottom of the cell, plant your young kale plants outside, spacing each plant 45cm apart. Brassicas prefer lighter soil, but this kale seems to grow for everyone regardless. It's not worth growing the shorter 'Raven' – there are far fewer leaves to gather. The vitamin-rich leaves contain selenium and that supports immunity.

'Raven'

Beetroot has a long harvesting season

'Alto'

Beetroot

Homegrown beetroot is a delight because it's so sweet and it can be harvested over a long period from summer until Christmas. We always cook some for our family feast on Boxing Day. My garden's cold and my earliest pickings are always from the F1 sausage-shaped 'Alto'. You can see when the roots are ready to harvest because they rise out of the ground. 'Boltardy' is my preferred round globe beetroot and both varieties have AGMs (RHS Award of Garden Merit).

Beetroot prefers lighter soil, as do most of the beet family, but it survives dry summers, although the roots may be smaller. My beetroot crop carried on growing into autumn last year, so we had a late flourish.

'Boltardy' can be sown earlier in the year without running to seed, hence its name. I use 10cm-wide drills and space the large knobbly seeds out across the width, to a depth of 1.5cm with 30cm between rows. Having a wider drill saves me having to thin out the seedlings and I also use wide drills for parsnips and carrots for the same reason.

If the weather's kind, beetroot seedlings can emerge in 10 days. You should be able to harvest by June from a spring sowing. I only do one sowing, but you can succession sow right up until early summer. You can also store beetroot in boxes of sand. It's the dark red beetroot varieties that contain the most betacyanin, an anti-inflammatory and antioxidant – so those are the ones to grow.

Continues over the page

Five more fabulous superfoods

Blueberries

These ericaceous plants will need to be grown in containers by many of us, unless your soil is acid. Net the fruit because blackbirds adore them. 'Chandler' produces bigger berries over a six-week period.

'Chandler'

Rainbow chard

Swiss chard 'Bright Lights'

The stems come in yellow, red, white and pink, and this beet has edible stems and leaves. It can be harvested from midsummer until Christmas, so it's more useful than spinach – which tends to be over in a flash. Contains beta-carotene and vitamins K and C.

Tomatoes

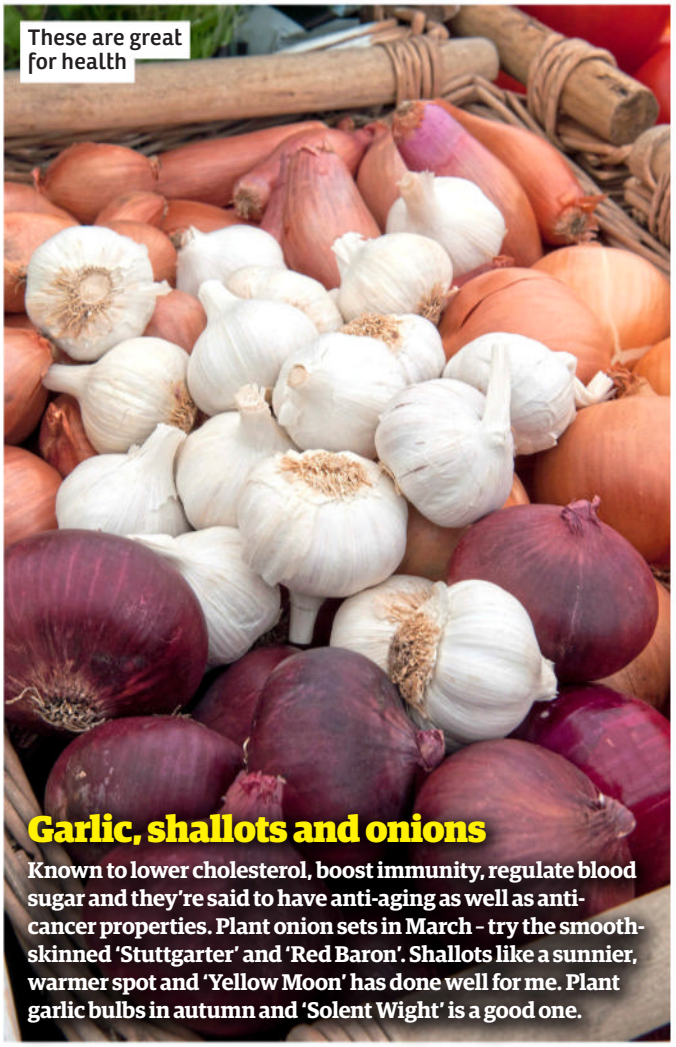
The newly bred, blight-resistant, early maturing varieties are best if growing outside. Sow in March or April, or order in plants. 'Crimson Crush' F1, 'Bliss' and 'Black Moon' are my choices. Tomatoes contain lycopene, which aids health, and it's easier to absorb when tomatoes are cooked.

'Crimson Crush'

'Karaka Black'

Blackberries

These immunity-boosting berries are very high in Vitamin C and they can be accommodated on a shed or fence. The New Zealand variety, 'Karaka Black', can be eaten from the bush in July and the large berries can crop for four weeks. The new 'Loch Tay' is thornless and prolific, bearing large berries. Berries contain anthocyanins, vitamins C and K and manganese.



These are great for health

Garlic, shallots and onions

Known to lower cholesterol, boost immunity, regulate blood sugar and they're said to have anti-aging as well as anti-cancer properties. Plant onion sets in March – try the smooth-skinned 'Stuttgarter' and 'Red Baron'. Shallots like a sunnier, warmer spot and 'Yellow Moon' has done well for me. Plant garlic bulbs in autumn and 'Solent Wight' is a good one.

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Carol Klein THIS WEEK AT GLEBE COTTAGE

The latest from Carol's beautiful cottage garden... plus her diary for the week!

Time to divide AND CHERISH!

Create new perennial plants to share and give your garden an instant lift for the year ahead

Make sure you've got a few new hosta buds included in each division

On drier early spring days, it's one of the best gardening feelings to grab your border fork, or maybe two border forks, and a sharp spade and head out to get the garden going for another year. Although nothing in gardening can be described as instant (apart perhaps from some of those TV makeover programmes!), dividing plants can be accomplished in a couple of hours. I'm tackling mainly autumnal flowerers now, though there are a few like hemerocallis that bloom earlier but I didn't get round to splitting last autumn.

Dividing plants is probably the oldest, the most tried and tested way to increase them. There's something hugely reassuring in joining in a practice that goes back millennia. Many of the plants we receive as gifts are divisions and often have sentimental attachments. My mum had a small, suburban garden but it was packed with plants. Whenever she visited, along with the cakes and pies she'd baked and the clothes she'd knitted and sewn would come chunks of plants, divisions from her garden. Many are here still, some much increased, and some passed on to relatives and friends, like a white *Phlox paniculata*. It's only known as 'Jeannie's white phlox', but goes from strength to strength. I'm about to split a few of the clumps now.

I dig up a few of the biggest clumps and split them either with back-to-back forks or a sharp spade, so long as in the process I don't damage new embryonic shoots just forming in the crown of the plants – this year's leaves and flowers. If it's really muddy they're washed in a bowl of water to enable accurate aim. If divisions are planted promptly, either in the ground or potted up, no harm will come to them. Using back-to-back forks is a traditional way of dividing plants. On smaller, more yielding roots, hand forks can be used in the same way, though my favourite method with any fibrous-rooted candidates and especially with primroses is to use my hands. I shake off surplus soil from the roots, and gently pull the plant apart into separate rosettes. Roots are then trimmed down to about 10cm before planting or potting. When replanting any divisions, don't fold roots over. Dangle them into the pot or hole and gently fill in with soil or compost.

This is a great time to divide autumn flowerers like rudbeckia and asters (Michaelmas daisies). Some asters spread around, making substantial shoots, sometimes with roots already developed. You can detach and move these but for some, including my all-time favourite 'Little Carlow', new shoots develop close to the crown and need to be carefully pulled apart into separate short shoots and planted three or five at a time, separately but fairly close together so that they'll form a decent clump. By autumn they should be well established and full of flowers.

It's possible to divide hostas with back-to-back forks but it's hard, especially when they're big, established clumps. It's slightly easier to lift the whole clump, which needs to be done in either case, and slice it into chunks like an enormous muddy cake, extracting a few 'slices' to make new plants while leaving the main plant intact. If possible, avoid cutting through the buds that will be just emerging at this time of year and try to ensure that every slice has a share of the buds. The only trouble with dividing hostas is that each new piece assumes a juvenile persona, so in the first couple of years after division, the leaves are smaller than the adult plant.

WHAT'S LOOKING GOOD NOW

Crocus flowers

Crocus tommasinianus is one of the earliest crocuses to flower

For years and years I've tried to get crocuses going in my garden with little success. Even though I've planted their corms deeply and covered them with wire mesh, this hasn't deterred squirrels, voles or mice (and possibly all three) from eating them. Apparently they're a great source of carbohydrates and packed with minerals and vitamins and though I'm all for supporting wildlife, I wish they could find another source to supplement their diet.

This year we've grown many corms in pots and they're all coming into flower now. They were kept high up as an insurance policy. I'm planting them out now since they should be out of the danger zone.

Only in one part of the garden have we ever been able to grow crocuses successfully. In a shady well-drained corner just below Annie's garden, *Crocus tommasinianus* has seeded itself, creating a small but special community.

PHOTOS: JONATHAN BUCKLEY, GAP PHOTOS

'There's something hugely reassuring in joining in a practice that goes back millennia'

My gardening DIARY

MONDAY The beech trees that looked bleak for months since their leaves fell are now imbued with rich pink, thanks to leaf buds, tightly wrapped but expanding every day. Soon we'll see the first splashes of green.

TUESDAY We're chitting potatoes! I grow early ones mainly as there isn't room for maincrop spuds. Each potato, eyes at the top, gets an egg carton compartment, then they sit on the top shelf of the greenhouse to sprout.

WEDNESDAY Fallen leaves polluted our pond too much for frogspawn last year and it was also covered in duckweed. We've cleared the debris, refilled with rainwater and added some fresh hornwort; some duckweed returning suits amphibians. Hopefully frogs will spawn here.

THURSDAY Filling a couple of module trays with good seed compost and sowing beetroot 'Boltardy' in one and rainbow chard in the other. Both have multiple seeds, so I sow one cluster per compartment. These are two of our hardiest and most reliable vegetables.

FRIDAY We still have two big pots of parsley but to keep a fresh supply, it's surface-sown sparsely in a half seed tray, covered with grit and watered from below with hot water just off the boil to hasten germination by breaking down the seedcoat.

SATURDAY The garden here is at the front of the house. At the back is a steep slope with hazels, a couple of tall sloes and behind them a field. Added to this is a camellia 'Donation' whose beautiful pink flowers are opening now.

SUNDAY Topping up lilies in pots helps you anticipate their summer flowering. They were planted so that the top of their bulbs reached halfway up their pots; now that new shoots are pushing through, they need more compost to grow into.

Carol Klein

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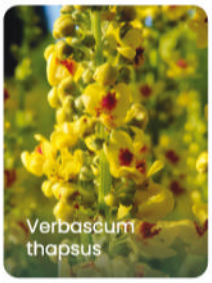
Centaurea cyanus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Over the FENCE

REAL readers' gardens!

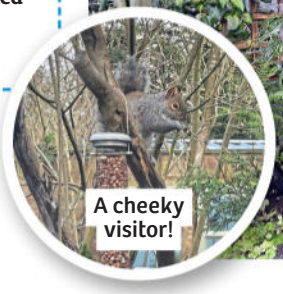
Brightness in the gloom

Caroline & David Broome

A plant-packed suburban garden in London that is accessible all year.

Pruning roses

Griselinia, mahonia and more under the apple tree



A cheeky visitor!

Despite the rain, January was productive. We pruned the climbing roses and the climbers on the perimeter fences. The battered ornamental grasses and remaining perennials were cut back and the borders were spread with manure mulch. The tubs on the roof terrace were topped up with compost too; there's so much soil erosion in this exposed position.

To keep my spirits up, I hung some extra feeders full of peanuts and mealworms, which attracted the parakeets and starlings, as well as a nuthatch and of course the squirrels! These feeders are well away from the permanent feeders so as not to deter the small birds. I can watch from the greenhouse, not even 2m away. Consequently, the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch was a roaring success! David has designed and built some new bird feeders and bug hotels as well.

The Catio is so sheltered that the tree fern didn't need protecting. All the pots of cannas and ginger lilies have the old foliage left on until temperatures rise. There are violas, heucheras, ajuga, evergreen ferns, nandinas and fatsias. Lovely for a coffee on sunny mornings.

The front garden looks a bit bedraggled, as the *Melianthus major* was struck down in the January cold snap. It's alive but in March will be pruned to ground level to encourage the new growth at its base.

Coloured dogwoods brighten up the gloom. Pittosporum 'Tom Thumb' and 'Irene Paterson', honey spurge and the maroon stems of berberis add structure and colour. The shady corner under the apple tree looks great all year round: variegated griselinia and mahonia 'Soft Caress', underplanted with colourful heucheras, ferns and grasses. The low boughs of the ancient lilac are underplanted with Corsican hellebores, black grass and ferns in the shady garden. Snowdrops and crocus are appearing, pink hellebore hybrids add colour and sorbaria 'Sem' has starry new shoots. But it's the sarcococca, whose fragrance fills the whole garden, that is the highlight of the month.

The auricula theatre on the Catio is now full of colourful primroses, which I bought with some Christmas gift vouchers. The auriculas will remain tucked up in the greenhouse until I change the displays in April.

Do join me in my garden: ***garden-girl.co.uk/the-blog***

Pretty primroses in the Catio

Borrowed landscape goes a long way

The ancient lilac is underplanted with ferns, grasses and hellebores

My highlight

Restocking the auricula theatre with colourful primulas.

Getting into the pruning

Daffodils opening

Spring is taking off in the garden!

Sandra Manning

An urban oasis in Twickenham with trees, shrubs and general planting with a variety of wildlife.

It's good to have colour in the garden to cheer up some of the dull days we've had. Cyclamen in a wall hanger near the kitchen door do just that. They also naturalise well. Even though the garden has had its fair share of rain, plants are awakening and bulbs are pushing through soggy soil. Snowdrops always

I'm taking the time to do a little 'housekeeping'

Joanna Daniels

A family garden in Astley Burf, Worcestershire, with recently developed beds and borders.

There's mistletoe!

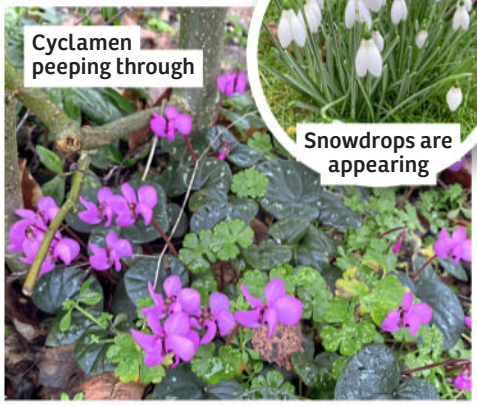
Look at the lovely lichen!

What a very wet, stormy start to the year. It's only a few short months since I was wondering if it would ever rain again – now I wonder if it will ever stop! I'm hopeful that my hard work last autumn digging soil improver into the beds will pay off and our free-draining soil will hold the moisture better this year.

I'm spending time outside doing what I'd call gardening housekeeping! The jobs that get forgotten as the weather improves and more interesting gardening can be undertaken. My focus so far has been cutting wood and tidying up the many piles of sticks and hazel poles around the garden. This is all now safely stored to season for next year's firewood. We have a small battery-powered chainsaw which is perfect for this. Even better – I can use it. The big chainsaws we have are well out of my league!

It's true what they say, you get warm twice with wood. Once cutting it and then when you burn it in the wood burner.

We're happy to share the garden with wildlife, although right now we're a little overwhelmed. There are moles excavating everywhere, mice in the garage and two plump rabbits who I fear are trapped in.



Cyclamen peeping through

Snowdrops are appearing

I'm collecting up molehill earth, have bought a rotary sieve and plan to sieve garden compost, mix it with molehill earth and slow-release fertiliser in the hope it will make a suitable growing medium for containers later in the year. It will be an experiment, but I don't think it can be worse than the bag of compost I bought recently.

I've pruned out some low-growing branches on the apple trees and was very excited to find a tiny mistletoe shoot. Luckily not on a branch I'd just cut off!

Follow me on Instagram *@talesfromacountrygarden*

My highlight

Finding mistletoe growing on an apple tree.

I'm taking so much pleasure in the garden

Skimmia gives a splash of colour

Cheery cyclamen

provide light in the shade of shrubs and, if you have room, they look good planted in swathes.

I'm constantly checking outdoor pots to ensure they don't become waterlogged. The grass *Stipa tenuissima* doesn't seem to be bothered; it's positively thriving. Skimmia 'Rubella' is flowering nicely, its evergreen leaves smooth and glossy. Behind that is a terracotta shelter for any resident frogs.

Most windowbox planting is surviving. Parsley has been in plentiful supply and lavenders are doing well. Despite my best endeavours to keep them warm, pelargoniums have perished in the frosts; luckily I took plenty of cuttings back in August.

Before I get too excited about seed sowing, I'm going to sit down and do a planting plan for the garden and allotment, trying out different plants. I'm thinking of doing an asparagus bed on the plot as it's my favourite vegetable, even though it takes up a lot of room for only a few weeks' harvesting. The bed has to be completely weed free.

Although I thought I'd pruned the cornus well, the red stems are in a bit of a tangle, so I'll cut the stragglers and save them to use as pea sticks.

Stipa tenuissima is perfectly happy

My highlight

More daylight hours to enjoy the garden.

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What to do THIS WEEK

Meet the team

Every week our team of experts guide you through what can be done in the garden now.

Ian Hodgson
Kew-trained garden designer Ian enjoys all aspects of gardening and grows unusual plants.

Karen Murphy
An all-round gardener, Karen grows fruit, veg and ornamentals and loves wildlife.

Geoff Stebbings
Geoff trained at Kew and is a general horticulturist, author and former head gardener.

Rob Smith
Television and social media star Rob is also a seed guardian for the Heritage Seed Library.

Karen Gimson
Garden designer and home cook Karen talks on BBC Radio Leicester about fruit, veg and flowers.

Nick Bailey
Nick is an award-winning garden designer, author, columnist and television presenter.

Debi Holland
RHS-trained horticulturist and professional gardener Debi has a passion for plants, wildlife and nature.

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JOB OF THE WEEK

PHOTOS: GEOFF STEBBINGS

PLANT AROUND PONDS

Make a splash by adding water to draw wildlife

Creating a pond is one of the best ways to increase wildlife in your garden. No matter how large or small it is, once filled with water and a few plants you'll find lots of creatures will flock to it. Pond skaters and whirligig beetles will be among the first visitors because they can fly, and then dragonflies searching for places to lay eggs.

But if the pond is surrounded by paving or mowed grass, it will be difficult for larger creatures such as frogs, toads or newts to reach. If possible, leave some grass to grow longer on one side of the pond to provide cover for creatures to access it either to breed or just to drink. Put some large stones in a shallow area to give access to the water for birds to drink, as well as help any animals escape if they accidentally fall in.

For a more cultivated look, plant a border next to the pond with flowers. These don't have to be traditional pondside plants because the soil around your pond won't necessarily be moist unless you've deigned it as an overflow area.

Small, dense shrubs including evergreens are ideal and will provide shade and cover for amphibians in summer. Carex and other plants with cascading growth that will reach into the water will soften the edge and provide access for insects.

GARDEN NEWS RECOMMENDS

Siberian iris look good next to ponds. Tolerant of average soil as well as flooding, their dense foliage offers protection for wildlife.

The gently arching foliage of carex can be used to soften the edges of a pond, and will even provide food for some wildlife.

Low shrubs like cotoneasters and dwarf conifers provide shade and a sanctuary for wildlife in dry spells in summer.

Hemerocallis (daylilies) are easy and tolerant plants that will gracefully arch over the edge of the pond and provide lots of colour.

What to do
THIS WEEK
In your flower garden

TAKE SOFTWOOD CUTTINGS

It's the easiest way to get more plants, at no cost!

PHOTOS GEOFF STEBBINGS DEBI HOLLAND

Spring is the perfect time to take softwood cuttings, when new growth is bursting back to life, full of vigour. Cuttings are a simple way to multiply your garden plants for free. Many herbs, perennials, climbers and shrubs can be easily propagated. Try rosemary, sage and lavender, osteospermum, pelargonium and hardy fuchsia.

Look for non-flowering new shoots on flexible stems; avoid old woody stems as they're less likely to produce roots. Collect your cuttings in the morning when plants are hydrated, as this will reduce cuttings succumbing to heat or wilting. Ideally prep stems immediately but if you need to postpone, place cuttings in a plastic bag and store in the fridge until you can plant them.

Once ready to plant, use a pencil, paintbrush or your finger as a dibber around the edge of your pot, then insert and firm cuttings into compost. After a good water, place the pot in a cloche, greenhouse or sunny windowsill out of direct sunlight.

Softwood cuttings lose moisture quickly and are prone to wilting, so misting is a good way to increase humidity and keep cuttings moist while not saturating the soil, which could cause stems to rot.

Label and date your pots and in a few weeks the cuttings should have rooted. Cuttings can also be rooted in a glass of water.

TOP TIPS

Select healthy new growth and cut 5-10cm lengths below a leaf node. Young stems are actively growing so are more likely to root than old.

Nip off all the lower leaves from the cut stems, either by hand or with snips, and then cut all the leaf tips in half to reduce water loss.

Fill a pot with gritty peat-free compost. Although young growth should root easily, increase your success rate by dipping cutting ends in rooting hormone.

Insert your cuttings around the pot's edge, then water. Place on a bright windowsill. Plastic pots will retain moisture longer than terracotta.

SOW DAHLIA SEED

'Bishop's Children' dahlias have dramatic single flowers with attractive dark foliage, which will shower your garden in a kaleidoscope of colours for months when deadheaded. Sow seeds now and once the risk of frost has passed from June onwards, seedlings will be large enough to plant outside; these dazzling blooms will even develop tubers in the first year. Sow seeds onto moist, peat-free compost, then cover with a propagator lid or clear plastic bag. Germination takes 7-10 days and flowers emerge after approximately 100-120 days from seed.

DIVIDE SNOWDROPS

As snowdrop flowers fade and the foliage is mature and starting to die down, it's the perfect time to lift and divide crowded plants. As the leaves die, the bulbs will be fully formed and the roots dying back. When clumps get crowded, the bulbs jostle for space and may not bloom well. Lift the clump and pull it carefully into smaller clumps of three or four bulbs. Replant these immediately, before they dry out, about 15cm apart in drifts. Plant them about 5cm deep in part shade or sun.

CHECK POTS FOR VINE WEEVIL

Vine weevils love to overwinter in pots. As grubs grow, so do their appetites, feeding on plant roots, making them very destructive in containers. The weevils start life as tiny eggs, which develop into distinctive white grubs around 1cm long with C-shaped, legless bodies and brown heads. Tip out pots onto a sheet and gently tease soil from the roots while searching for grubs. Replace or top up tubs with fresh compost. Encourage natural predators like hedgehogs, birds and toads, or water compost with nematodes.

REPAIR BARE PATCHES ON LAWNS

The wet winter hasn't been ideal for our lawns, and if there are bare patches you can start to repair them. Make sure you rake up fallen leaves and rake away any thick moss. To help relieve soil compaction, push a fork into the bare areas and remove to help drainage. If the weather is dry, you can brush sand into the holes for more permanent relief. You can then sow over the bare areas in the next month or so. Spread some compost over the areas and level it and then sow some grass seed and rake it in, or use a 'patch pack' that will include compost and seeds. Water and peg some fleece over the area to encourage germination and prevent birds eating the seeds.

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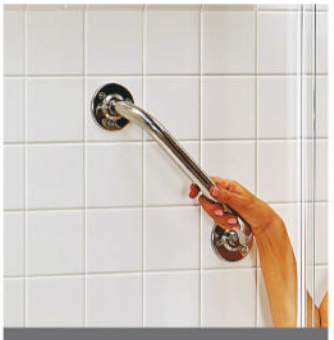

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CLEVER WAYS WITH DAHLIAS

These expert planting approaches will help them shine from summer right through to autumn

Dahlia 'Playa Blanca' can be teamed with other dahlias in the same colour

I've just ordered my dahlias for the year. This winter activity really lifts my spirits, with thoughts of the colour to come later in the season. I find dahlias so useful, not least because of their vast range of flower colours and forms, but also because they bloom for four or more months from summer into autumn. For this reason, I've experimented with them in numerous ways and developed a few different styles of growing them together and with other perennial plants. Here are my two favourite planting approaches for dahlias. Fancy giving them a try?

Consistent colour, mixed forms

A really satisfying way to put together several dahlias is to pick a single colour and then group every dahlia flower form in that colour. So, let's say you're going for a pink collection, you'd pick three or four different cultivars in pink but with totally different flower shapes. For example: waterlily, pom-pom, cactus or anemone. You could even add in a perennial (in pink) for further floral contrast. An example of a white mixed perennial and dahlia set could be 'Playa Blanca' (a cactus form), 'Snowflake' (a pom-pom) and 'White Onesta' (a waterlily form). Now add to this set of three the floaty, starry white flowers of *Erigeron annuus* and you have a delightfully unified set of flowers that are simultaneously bound by colour, yet contrasted in form. This approach creates a very professional look, is very easy to do and can be achieved in any of the huge range of colours dahlias offer.

Dahlia 'Bright Eyes' is one of the very best for strong colour matching

Extract and replicate colours

This approach starts with selecting a multi-tonal dahlia. It may be one carrying red and white or orange and yellow, but the principle is the same – match the two dahlia colours with two plants in similar tones. A good example is dahlia 'Bright Eyes' with its strong, primrose-yellow centre surrounded by deep intense pink. Pair it with the large, deep pink 'Cartouche' to repeat the outer petal colour and 'Kelsey Sunshine' to replicate the strong primrose centre – a perfect, tied-together trio.

But you don't need to stick exclusively to dahlias to create triumphant trios. How about pairing two dahlias and adding a carefully chosen perennial to the mix? Let's start with dahlia 'Seniors Hope'. I grew this for the first time two years ago and loved its double blooms with several different dark fruit and pink tones. Try replicating the dark tones by growing it with the cactus-flowered, deep plum coloured dahlia 'Ambition'. And repeat the lighter tones with lysimachia 'Beaujolais'. The trio feel part of the same carefully curated collection, but with contrasting differences in flower form, coupled with a sense that they belong together.

Roots in the community

Your local nursery needs you!

As we head into plant buying season I'd like to persuade you to resist the urge to buy all your plants from the local mega garden centre. Sure, these businesses usually do a great job and volume buying keeps their prices down, but lots of staff and large premises can also elevate those costs. Consider, if you can, buying from your local small-scale nursery. They might not have a coffee shop and a million baubles at Christmas, but what they will have is soul and spirit, along with some much-loved plants, decades of experience and a significant input into the local economy. Small nurseries are the lifeblood of gardening in the UK, and they're in trouble and closing down at an unprecedented rate. So, for at least some of your plant buying, will you consider supporting your local nursery? You'll be doing a great service – and receiving a great service too.

PHOTOS: GAP PHOTOS

What to do
THIS WEEK
On your fruit & veg plot

GROW ONION SETS

Discover foolproof steps to growing plump, tasty bulbs

Onions are one of the easiest and most useful of crops in the garden – and the kitchen. You can grow onions from seed and from sets, which are small, immature onions. If you want something unusual you'll need to grow from seed over the next month, but if you're happy with a choice of half a dozen kinds, including red onions, sets may be right for you.

Onions prefer a fertile soil that drains well and a spot in full sun. They don't grow well in shade. Clay soils must be improved by digging in organic matter and/or sand before planting. Raised beds are ideal and if you have veg 'trugs' or you want to grow in pots, these are possible too. If you've had onion white rot in the soil you mustn't plant onions again so growing in pots is the best option.

For large onions you should plant them 10-15cm apart in rows 30-40cm apart, but you can be more relaxed with onion sets in pots, where you can plant them closer together and harvest immature onions as spring onions and leave the others to reach maturity. If planted closer in the rows you'll still get a good crop of smaller bulbs. Always leave a gap between the rows that allows easy weeding because onions won't thrive if overwhelmed by weeds.

The main problem will be bolting, when the plants produce a flower stem rather than a bulb. Cold snaps or drought once the plants are growing will encourage this. Red onions are always more prone to bolting than white onions, so plant extras to allow for this.

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PHOTOS: GEOFF STILEMAN-SS, GAP PHOTOS

STEP BY STEP

1 Prepare the soil well and remove any perennial weeds. Fork it over to loosen it and rake it to a fine tilth.

2 Carefully sort through the sets, discarding any of the bulbs that are dry and thin or that have signs of mould.

3 Plant with a trowel so tops are just covered. Don't just push them in; they'll push themselves out as they grow.

4 Birds sometimes pull out the sets so check them now and then. Replant disturbed ones until well rooted.

GET PEPPERS STARTED

Peppers and chillies are as simple to grow as tomatoes, but they take longer to reach flowering size so they need an early start. They also need higher temperatures to stimulate germination, especially some of the hotter chillies. A temperature of 25C is ideal. Your usual propagator in the greenhouse may not be warm enough, so pre-sprout the seeds on wet kitchen paper in a plastic box placed in the airing cupboard. Watch them every day and as soon as you see roots emerge, carefully plant them in individual pots of compost and keep them warm to grow.

PLANT OUT POTATOES

If you live in a suitably mild spot of the country, it's possible to start planting out early varieties of potato, if they've got nice strong chits of about 2cm long – leave it just a couple of weeks more in exposed or cold regions. If your chits aren't growing as you'd like, give them more light. Rub off all but about six chits for planting. Plant each tuber 30cm apart and 13cm deep in the soil and cover well, taking care not to damage young shoots. Keep an eye on forecasts for frosty spells though, so you can earth up soil around new shoots that come through, or put fleece over them. You can also begin to chit maincrop potatoes ahead of their April planting.

SOW BROAD BEANS

Broad beans are among the first crops you can sow. They're hardy and easy to grow. You can buy plants but the seeds are large and so easy to grow that it's better to sow your own. If you have a sunny spot and well-drained soil you could sow them direct, where they are to grow. Sow them about 5cm deep and 15-20cm apart in a double row. If the weather is still cold and wet it's best to sow them in pots or cell trays. Sow two seed together in a pot or large cell and germinate on a cool windowsill. The young plants can withstand light frost so can be planted out in late May.

ROB SMITH

KITCHEN GARDENER

Helping you get your best-ever fruit and veg

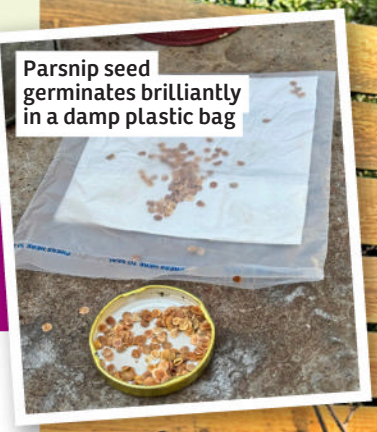
Marching into action

There's plenty to keep green fingers busy and beds productive this month

KITCHEN GARDENER
Rob Smith
TV gardener and social media star. Also a seed guardian for the Heritage Seed Library

As we edge into March, it's the perfect time to give autumn-sown peas and beans a bit of a boost. My broad beans have quietly sat through everything winter could throw at them, including frost, wind and rain. Now, as the days lengthen and the light slowly strengthens, they're ready for a bit of encouragement, and a light scattering of feed between the plants, raked into the soil surface, is all that is needed to help them move into active growth. I like to keep things simple and traditional, using dried seaweed along with blood, fish and bone. Just a couple of handfuls of each spread along the row does the job nicely. Winter rain can wash nutrients from the soil, particularly on lighter ground, and this gentle feed helps replace what's been lost. The result is stronger plants and a heavier crop later on. If you added to the bed with manure or compost in autumn, feeding is less important, but where organic matter was missed, this little boost can make all the difference.

Inside, my chilli seedlings have reached the stage where they're ready to be potted on. I started them in modules, and my new silicone-bottomed trays have made the job easy rather than a fiddle. Instead of teasing seedlings out or squeezing rigid plastic, I can simply press the base and the whole rootball slides free undisturbed. Each seedling goes into a 9cm pot filled with peat-free compost, and once potted they head back into the heated propagator to keep them ticking along, though a warm windowsill works just as well.



Parsnip seed germinates brilliantly in a damp plastic bag

Feeding broad beans to give them a boost

Squash 'Ayote' is an acquired taste!

Remember to turn the pots daily so the plants grow straight rather than leaning towards the light.

Parsnips have tested my patience over the years. Direct sowing often leads to patchy rows and empty spaces, which is always frustrating. I've found the trick with parsnips is fresh seed and a little plastic bag! Parsnip seed doesn't keep well and its viability drops sharply after a year, so buying new seed each season is essential. Rather than sowing straight into the ground, I start them on damp kitchen paper inside a sealed plastic

Spice up the shade

Down by the back of the house, I have a selection of hostas in pots due to the shady damp conditions down there. The sun never touches them, which they like, and it adds a little interest to a darker area of the garden. Last year I added a potted wasabi, which enjoys the same conditions, as I'm not growing it for the rhizome but the peppery leaves, and believe it or not, the edible flowers as well! These pretty white blooms add a little heat as a garnish on soups, while the fresh leaves are delicious stir fried or added to salads in moderation. If you're looking for a veg plant for a shady area, I'd say to have a go with a wasabi. You'll be pleasantly surprised.

Add a little heat to your cooking with a wasabi plant

Sieving the soil ready to use in the new greenhouse when it arrives

PHOTOS: DARREN LAIN

Chilli seedlings are getting potted up

bag. This simple method lets you see which seeds are viable, as within about 21 days you'll spot a tiny white root emerging from those that intend to grow. These can then be carefully planted, ensuring every position in the row produces a plant.

Outside I've been clearing plants from the raised beds where the new greenhouse will sit. The soil is being sieved and stored in buckets, ready to be reused inside the greenhouse once it's built. Mixed with a bit of well-rotted manure, it will make a rich growing medium and saves me a little money at the same time.

I'm enjoying the last of my winter squash. The final Guatemalan green 'Ayote' has a striking green flesh that can be surprising at first, but its flavour more than makes up for its looks. Roasted, it develops a sweet, chestnut-like richness, and when eaten raw in coleslaw it has a fresh melon sweetness. I'm saving the seeds for sowing after the last frost, though I have a feeling I'll be the only one enjoying them again next winter!

NEXT WEEK Spring sowing

Homegrown

with Karen Gimson

Peach yoghurt with coconut granola

It's time to hand-pollinate the peach and nectarine trees in my polytunnel. I'm taking a very soft brush and gently going from one flower to the next. Bees would normally do this work, but they aren't out and about much yet. It's a calming, pleasant task and I enjoy gazing at the beautiful blossom and marvelling at how these will turn into delicious fruit by summer. Last year, we had record harvests, and I'm hoping for the same this year. The crunchy coconut and nut granola is the perfect topping for this dessert. The recipe will make more than you need for this dish. It can also be eaten for breakfast or sprinkled over any fresh or cooked fruit. It's delicious! You can use fresh or tinned peaches for this tasty treat. I used my own frozen raspberries too.

Ingredients

Serves 4

FOR THE GRANOLA

Makes about 640g

- 400g porridge oats
- 60g desiccated coconut
- 120g chopped mixed nuts
- 65g sunflower and pumpkin seeds
- ½ tsp salt
- 4 tbsp honey
- 1 tbsp vanilla extract
- 60ml sunflower oil
- 1 tbsp maple syrup

TO ASSEMBLE

- 2 fresh peaches, or tin of peaches in fruit juice
- 50g raspberries, fresh or frozen
- 300g Greek yoghurt

Method

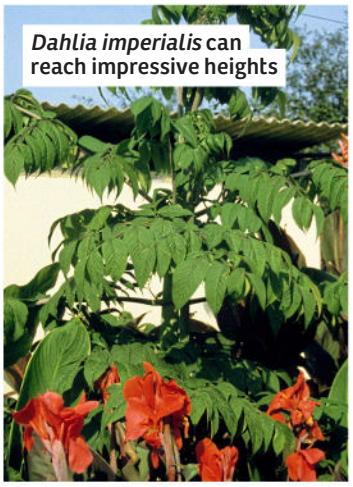
- Mix all the dry ingredients together.
- In a separate bowl, whisk together the liquids.
- Mix wet and dry ingredients.
- Line a deep baking tray with non-stick paper.
- Spread mixture in the tin.
- Bake at 150C/ Gas 2 for 45 mins, stirring several times.
- Turn oven down to 100C / Gas ¼ until dry.
- When cold, store in an airtight container until needed.
- To serve, spoon peaches and raspberries into glass dishes.
- Divide the yoghurt between the dishes.
- Top with the granola, about 1-2 tbsp per serving.

Read more at *bramblegarden.com*. Instagram *@karengimson1*.

NEXT WEEK Butterbean & butternut squash stew

GARDENING WITH THE EXPERTS

The world's finest share their tips for success



Dahlia imperialis can reach impressive heights

See if you can find the candy-striped maize plant for instant glam

Abutilons provide a pop of colour in summer

PHOTOS: IAN COOKE, CONNOR WARREN

A small exotic garden in the UK

When to plant and sow exotics

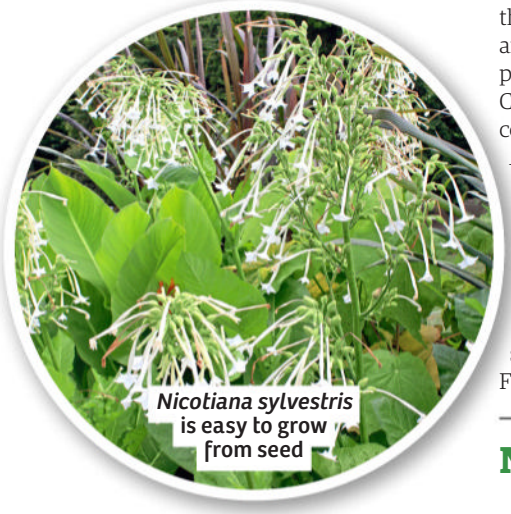
Soil conditions and frost risk mean patience is essential

Ian Cooke

Ian has spent his life working with plants and gardens. He has a particular interest in exotic planting and held the National Plant Collection of Canna. Ian is the author of nine gardening books and in 2008, he was awarded an Associate of Honour by the Royal Horticultural Society for his contribution to horticulture.

In the next few weeks the weather will be getting warmer, but don't be in any rush to plant out exotics. Soil will still be cold and wet and there's risk of frost. If you have a heated greenhouse or a warm windowsill, there's still time to root cuttings and sow seeds of some of the fast-growing exotics for summer planting.

Hardy exotics and climbers provide a good background and shelter for our more tender plants. Campsis 'Madame Galen' produces bright orange flowers in late summer and is generally hardy. Many abutilons are tender, but there are hardy ones such as *Abutilon megapotanicum*, with small but exquisite red and yellow lantern flowers throughout the summer. *A. milleri* and 'Kentish Belle' are also quite hardy. There is also a hardy passionflower called *Passiflora caerulea*. Climbers from seed include thunbergia, which comes in numerous colours, eccremocarpus, *Ipomoea lobata* and cobaea, but do look for the white version, which is stunning.



Nicotiana sylvestris is easy to grow from seed

Growing from seed is a cheap way of starting many exotic plants. I've loved *Nicotiana sylvestris* for years. The seed is small and needs warmth to start with, but eventually you get 1m tall, self-supporting stems with pure white, scented flowers. For variegated plants, look for seeds of sturdy, small, tree-like *Lavatera arborea* 'Variegata' (you may need to look at unusual seed suppliers). It's also worth searching for the variegated ricinus 'Bloem Paul d'Hont', which can be slow growing but makes striking marbled red foliage. Easier to source is the candy-striped maize plant (*Zea mays japonica*) with broad, multi-coloured foliage.

Now is also the time to start tender bulbs if you have a warm greenhouse. Cannas benefit from warmth to get them started, but do beware of the continuing risk of virus if you buy dormant rhizomes. If you also start dahlias under glass, you can root new shoots as cuttings. An unusual dahlia is *D. imperialis*, with pale pink single flowers in a late warm summer, but worth growing for its lush foliage and height – it can reach 2-3m in a season.

You can also start colocasia, alocasia and the striking caladiums under glass. These latter ones really do need warmth to grow well. An unusual bulb is *Amorphophallus konjac*, related to the dramatic, foul-smelling corpse flower. It does produce a pungent flower in some years, but is worth growing for its exotic foliage alone. If you have a bulb from past years, it may produce several shoots. Reduce these to just one and you'll get the biggest leaves.

NEXT WEEK Growing chrysanths from cutting

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THE PROBLEM SOLVER

Stefan Buczacki

Professor Buczacki is a horticultural expert, writer and former chair of *Gardeners' Question Time*

Got a problem? Our Problem Solver can help! See our contact details on page 3 #GNASKTHEEXPERTS

It might be the petrol that's the problem, not the mower

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK, ALAMY, GAP PHOTOS

I can't get my mower to start reliably

David McIntyre, Beeston, Nottinghamshire

Stefan says: You say you recall me having a 'magic solution' to problems in starting petrol-engined lawnmowers but have forgotten what it was. I think 'magic solution' is slightly overstating things, but I'm sure the advice you're referring to was my response to a reader who found his trusty old petrol-engine rotary mower was repeatedly cutting out or just failing to start and he was tempted to replace it with an electric machine. As I said then, there are now some excellent battery-powered mowers because battery life has improved considerably in recent years. But as I suggested, there may have been nothing wrong with the petrol mower because the solution lay not with the mower itself, but with the petrol.

Folk with much more technical know-how than I have say petrol has changed in recent years and as I understand it, ethanol is now added and over a fairly short period it will absorb moisture and cause the engine to stop. I've even been told it's unreliable if kept in the can for more than about two weeks.

I've swapped to using something called Aspen 4, which is a specially purified fuel. It's about three times the price but can be stored without deteriorating for five years. It can also be used in generators and similar 4-stroke engines.

Aspen 4 is alkylate petrol without oil

There is another version, Aspen 2, which is suitable for 2-stroke engines and the manufacturers say these fuels contribute to reduced waste and lower carbon dioxide emissions. You'll find a network of nationwide suppliers if you search online.

Aspen is made in Sweden and it was developed some years ago in response to a belief that the many Swedish lumber workers who used chainsaws day after day were experiencing some health problems, possibly as a result of exposure to petrol fumes.

But whether you stay with petrol or used the alternative, this is the time of year to have your mower serviced when the technicians aren't inundated with work.

FOUR WINTER LAWN PROBLEMS

Frosty footprints

Frozen grass blades can't absorb impact; cells shatter when walked on, leaving dead brown patches.

Fusarium patch

A fungus, also called snow mould, that appears when it's mild and wet, and often after covering snow thaws.

Red thread

Another common fungus. It appears in wet conditions, causing dead patches of turf. They usually recover.

Worm casts

Worms can leave little mounds of soil on lawn surfaces. Brush off the casts with a stiff broom.

Are bags of concentrated manure worth it?

Karen Marchant, by email

Stefan says: You were tempted to buy some bags of concentrated manure at your local nursery at a reduced price, but you feel it's still pretty costly. I agree with you. These so-called concentrated manures are expensive when compared with fresh organic matter such as cow or stable manure – or of course, garden compost, which costs virtually nothing. In the past I've been told that some of them contain additional fertiliser, so they perform a dual role.

Nonetheless, I still think they're an expensive way of doing things unless you live in a small town garden and have no access to any other organic matter. If I were to feed my plants and condition the soil in my half an acre by this method, I would need a bank loan. If manure is unavailable, the answer must lie in making your own compost. The cost of a pair of compost bins and even a small shredder will soon be repaid.

If you can't access manure, then make your own compost

You might not see the signs of codling moth caterpillars until you cut fruit open

Why do our stored apples keep spoiling?

Angela Rivers, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire

Stefan says: When you picked your apples in autumn, you felt you were taking special care to choose only perfect fruit. However, you're now checking them in the store shed and almost every one of them has a small hole and/or a grub in it. You wonder if anything can be done to prevent this in the coming season.

The grubs are the caterpillars of the codling moth, which is extremely common and widespread and I don't believe there's anything that will realistically control it. The larvae burrow into the fruit, often entering through the 'eye', so there's no obvious entry hole. Pheromone traps, which attract male moths, are sold for codling moth control but all they do is monitor the number of males, and their primary use is in commercial orchards where they're used to assist in the accurate timing of insecticide sprays to coincide with the main peak of egg hatching.

Is it unusual that our snowdrop has twin flowers?

Jane Tanner, Ripon, North Yorkshire

Stefan says: What a wonderful season this is for snowdrops, which bring the promise of a new season to gardens everywhere. In my garden they've spread year after year and now occur all over the place.

The snowdrop is a hugely variable plant and although twin-flowered plants aren't common, they do arise from time to time. I wonder if yours has two flowers on the same stem or on two separate stems, which is seen more frequently.

You describe your snowdrops as *Galanthus nivalis*, which they may well be, although most of the double-flowered plants I've seen arose in varieties of the related species, *Galanthus elwesii*. I recall that the variety 'Mrs Thompson' is particularly likely to produce twin flowers, although not every plant every year will do so. I suggest you mark your plant and separate it carefully after flowering and keep it apart from your others to see if the feature perpetuates.

Galanthus 'Mrs Thompson' has a tendency to throw twin flowers

Continues over the page

THE PROBLEM SOLVER

What is the best variety of gypsophila to grow for my daughter's wedding at the end of June?

Lizzie Atkins, via Facebook

Stefan says: Gypsophila is a traditional wedding plant and really has no equal for its sprays of tiny feathery flowers. Although most of the best varieties are perennial, they should give you a good display in the first year and my suggestion is the variety 'Snowflake'. However, I do wonder if you will be able to produce enough for your wedding at the end of June, because in some years gypsophilas don't fully come into their own until July. You'll help by giving them cloche protection in the early stages if you direct sow outdoors. You may wish to hedge your bets, moreover, by sowing some indoors now and transplanting them in a few weeks' time.

Gypsophila adds softness to a bridal bouquet

Don't feed your lawn until the weather warms up in spring

Should I feed my lawn before or after growth gets under way?

Geoff Harvey, Crowborough, East Sussex

Stefan says: No, please be patient. I never feed our lawns before April as the grass needs to have started growing to benefit from absorbing the fertiliser. And do be sure to choose the most appropriate fertiliser. Ideally you need a spring and summer rather than an autumn blend - the latter is balanced in order to produce tougher growth to survive the winter.

It's also worth deciding if you want a fertiliser mixture containing weedkiller and/or mosskiller. Don't use a mixture containing weedkiller if there are no serious weed problems in your lawn or if you're happy to see at least some wildflowers among your turf. I never worry about daisies, clovers or creeping speedwell and similar wild plants, but the robust, invasive kinds such as creeping buttercup or those like many kinds of thistle that produce big smothering rosettes of leaves really do need to be dealt with.

How can we help our poorly hoya?

Grace Reason, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Stefan says: You were given your hoya plant over 20 years ago and it's watched your children grow up and is a true member of the family. You've trained it up one wall of your conservatory but for the past year or so, the leaves have started to look a little on the pale side and there are fewer flowers than before. You say it's only fed about twice a year, when you remember, and you now ask if moving it on from its 35cm pot would help.

I think it deserves a bit more TLC. My suggestion is not to re-pot it but to scrape away the top 10cm or so of compost and replace it with a fresh multi-purpose blend. Lightly prune the top growth, removing any really straggly or tired looking parts. Then give it liquid tomato feed every three weeks during the growing season.

A regular feed should bring your hoya into flower again

Spindles are an important native food source for birds

Why do my spindle trees produce hundreds of flowers but no berries?

Lucy Vickery, Sheffield, South Yorkshire

Stefan says: I'm delighted you're growing spindles, as they're an important British species and should be in every wildlife garden and native plant hedge. They have distinctive pink fruits with orange seeds that are loved by birds and other creatures.

There's no obvious reason why yours should produce flowers but no fruit. It can't be a matter of a failure to cross-fertilise because spindle flowers are hermaphrodite. However, they're insect-pollinated and the only cause I can think of is if the plants are in a windy spot or somewhere that is otherwise short of insects – perhaps somewhere too shaded. You could try planting spring and summer flowers nearby that are attractive to insects to see if this will bring them in.

My jade necklace vine is ailing. Please help!

Sarah Duffy, by email

Stefan says: *Crassula rupestris marnieriana* 'Hottentot' is an unusual trailing variety of crassula with the common name of the jade necklace vine. Crassulas are succulents native to South Africa adapted to areas of dry climate. They make good houseplants for a well-lit situation if a few simple rules are followed. Most problems arise from overwatering or a failure to re-pot.

Over winter, keep plants on the dry side, watering lightly every three weeks or so. From April water regularly, allowing the compost to dry out slightly between waterings. During the growing season from April-September, feed once a month with a liquid houseplant fertiliser or specialist cacti feed. Every two years repot into a slightly larger pot in spring using a cactus compost.

'Hottentot' doesn't like to be overwatered

To get more catkins on garrya, prune less

Does my garrya need more pruning to produce catkins?

Wendy Stockbridge, by email

Stefan says: Your garrya actually needs less pruning to encourage catkins. The great majority of flowering shrubs produce flowers on older growth and hard pruning simply encourages leafy vegetative shoots. A freestanding garrya can be allowed to develop naturally without any pruning other than the removal of wayward or crossing shoots. If wall-trained, tie in the main stems and prune out those shoots that grow out from the wall in early spring as the new growth starts, or those that are badly placed.

If you want to renovate a poorly shaped garrya, cut back to a framework of branches over three or four years. Garryas are grown from cuttings, so any new growth from the base will not be a sucker from a rootstock. It can either be pruned out or retained as necessary.

Continues over the page

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THE PROBLEM
SOLVER

A large *Sambucus nigra* can be cut back hard

What are the options for pruning a sambucus?

Andrew Skinner, Alveston, Derbyshire

Stefan says: Most gardeners will know sambucus as the elder or elderberry, but it's a large group of plants and unfortunately, you don't say which one you have. My guess, however, is that it will be a form of the common native elder, *Sambucus nigra*, which is found in hedgerows and in scrub almost everywhere. Numerous ornamental kinds are popular, among them 'Black Lace' with fern-like leaves, 'Aurea', with golden foliage, and several kinds with dark, almost black leaves of which the striking 'Black Beauty' is I think the best.

There are two pruning options: if the oldest one third of the shoots is pruned to soil level each year in spring, the plants will reach a greater height, but the leaves will generally be less attractively coloured and smaller. The other option is to cut all shoots back to soil each spring; you'll get the best foliage, but inevitably on a smaller plant.

Angel's trumpets are tender plants that need to be protected over winter

How do I deal with my overwintered angel's trumpets?

Nish Patel, by email

Stefan says: Brugmansias, commonly known as angel's trumpets, are tender shrubs grown for their large trumpet-shaped flowers, which are often deliciously scented. They need to be overwintered somewhere frost-free and kept on the dry side. If in doubt, don't water. As new buds start to show in spring, begin watering and liquid feed once or twice a month with Miracle-Gro or Phostrogen.

During summer, place in a sunny spot outdoors after all danger of frost has passed. In October cut back to a framework of main branches about 1.2m long. Cutting back harder year after year will affect flowering. All parts of the plant are highly toxic if ingested and sap may be an irritant, so wear gloves when handling or pruning. Repot every couple of years using John Innes No.3 potting compost. Once in the largest practical pot size, top dress by scraping away some of the old potting compost and replacing with new.

Quick QUESTIONS

The Indian bean tree does have seed pods that look like runner beans

I noticed a tree in Cambridge in autumn with leaves the size of dinner plates and seed pods that looked like runner beans. What was it?

Frank Taylor, Northampton, Northamptonshire

You say you thought you knew your trees but are puzzled by this one. I'm sure you've seen a specimen of the magnificent *Catalpa bignonioides*, the Indian bean tree, which comes from the southern United States. It's hardy enough in Britain but does grow large and is only suitable for the largest gardens.

How do I prune my *Gaura lindheimeri* 'The Bride'?

Marcus Pennyfeather, Grantham, Lincolnshire

This has long been one of my favourites. It was really popular with the Victorian gardeners too, with its delicate sprays of star-shaped flowers and willow-like leaves. It's fully hardy, but I always leave the old growth on mine over winter and cut it back close to soil level in March.

Why do I not get many flowers on my rose 'Golden Celebration'?

Jim Pawsey, Hull, East Yorkshire

My suspicion is that your rose is too well-manured and is having too much of a good thing, especially the nitrogen contained in the manure. I suggest you cut back on the manure and feed it twice a year – in spring and again immediately after the first flowering – with a proprietary rose fertiliser, which will contain a balance of nitrogen to stimulate leafy growth and potash to encourage flowering.

The leaves turned yellow and fell from my hydrangeas last year. Why?

Maureen Burton, by email

I'm sure it's the hot and dry summer that's behind it. Hydrangeas love and need moisture, both in the ground and in the air, which is why they're so good in coastal gardens. Give them plenty of thick mulch once the soil is really wet and repeat this mulch during the year. Some rose fertiliser would also help in spring.

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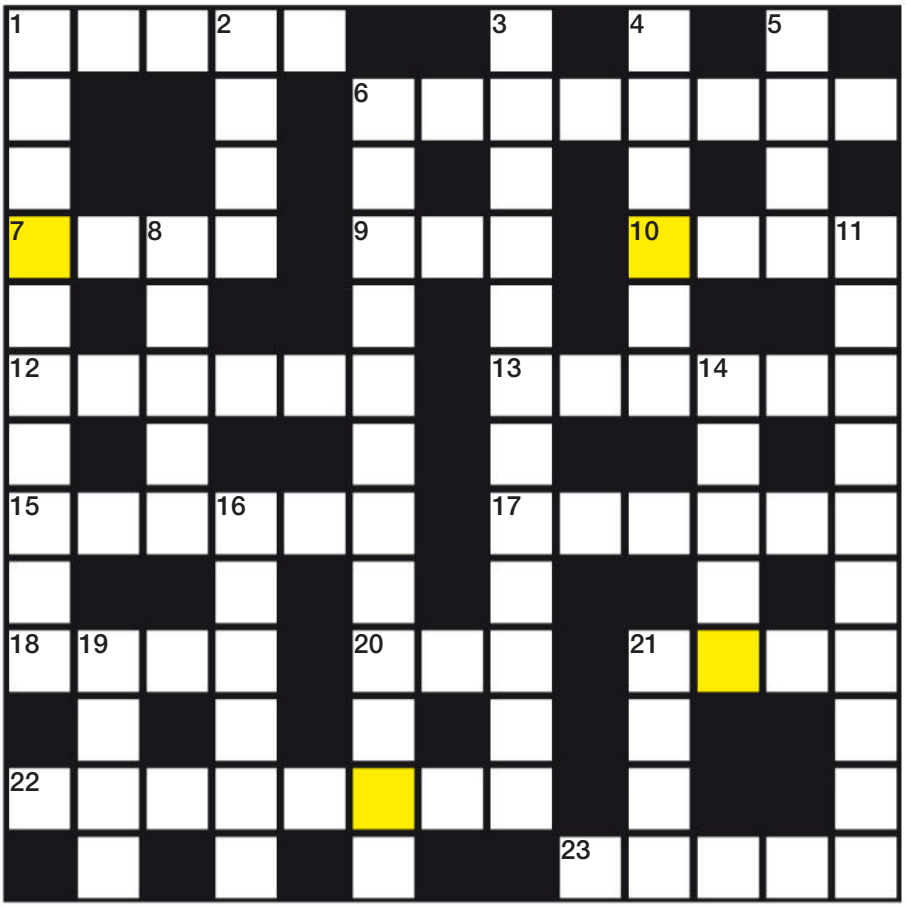
TEA BREAK weekly prize crossword

NUMBER 9

Once you have completed the crossword, take the letters in the shaded squares and rearrange them to spell out the name of a vegetable. This is your prize answer.



ACROSS

1 Noisy garden decoration, wind - - - (5)
6 Horse chestnut genus (8)
7 Slight contact between snooker balls (4)
9 Penultimate Greek letter (3)
10 Primary organ of photosynthesis in green plants (4)
12 Pearl-producing shellfish (6)
13 - - - lily, bloom that shares its name with a species of antelope (6)
15 Island of Malaysia in the Strait of Malacca (6)
17 Canopy (6)
18 Soya-bean curd (4)
20 Glide down the piste (3)
21 Harvest – what you sow? (4)
22 Large tropical plant with a trunk-like stem bearing fronds at the top (4, 4)
23 East German secret police (5)

DOWN

1 Frothy sap deposited on plants by froghopper nymphs (6, 4)
2 Flowerless plant found growing in forests, eg (4)
3 Process of bone formation (12)
4 Gym exercise (4-2)
5 Air, atmosphere (4)
6 Alternative name for the herb *Lotus tetragonolobus* (9-3)
8 Black-eyed - - -, plant with bright-yellow flowers (5)
11 Tropical fragrant shrub of the genus plumeria (10)
14 Star - - -, dried seedpod used as a spice (5)
16 Business skill (6)
19 Pod vegetable used in Cajun and Creole cuisine also known as ladies' fingers (4)
21 Fungal disease of plants which results in discoloured patches (4)

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SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD No 6 – February 14

Across: 1 Squash, 4 Strait, 9 Cold frame, 10 Ibiza, 11 Mail, 12 Gusto, 14 Belle, 15 White, 17 Globe, 19 Lieu, 21 Epsom, 23 Bird's-foot, 24 Thymol, 25 Jersey.

Down: 1 Sowing, 2 Ugli, 3 Sycamore, 5 Taff, 6 Amarillo, 7 Treble, 8 Elfin, 13 Stingray, 14 Baguette, 15 Wombat, 16 Dijon, 18 Enmity 20 Oslo, 22 Saps. **Prize answer:** Gladiolus

Winner of Crossword No 6 is Roy Hopper from Devon.

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GREATMAGAZINES

Pick of the POST

With Simon Caney, GN Editor

Fabulous fungi

After walking round my garden enjoying the aconites, snowdrops and crocuses I came across these beautiful little fungi. What a brilliant colour!

David Black, by email

Spring on the way!

A lovely carpet of snowdrops I saw on a recent visit to Warley Place in Essex.

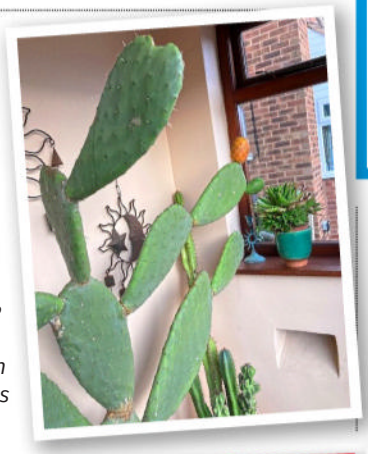
Terry Babbage, by email

Prickly customer

Just look at this amazing prickly pear. But my question is: can I eat the fruit?

Andy Shuker, by email

Simon says: *You can, Andy - although you need to peel off the thick skin and spines first. But you can find prickly pear jam with various online retailers – I confess I have never tried it though!*



STAR PRIZE

Green shoots of recovery

Thank you for sharing news about the Sycamore Gap tree in a recent issue of GN. I wholeheartedly agree with the Woodland Trust's Important Trees petition, which I am encouraging family and friends to sign.

My wife and I recently visited Northumberland and fortunately had the first day without rain this year (or so it seemed!) so took the opportunity to walk to the memorial site of the tree. So sad that this tree was illegally felled but nature is beginning the repair process with several shoots now growing around the stump.

Steve Watkin, by email

Simon says: *Completely agree Steve, what a tragedy that such a magnificent tree was destroyed. It is so heartening to see new shoots, and the National Trust has grown on seedlings from the site too.*

Steve wins a £25 voucher from Mr Fothergill's for use in its mail-order catalogue. It's packed with a huge choice of quality seeds and exciting flower, fruit and veg plants.

Open to visitors

I've finally got round to putting up a nestbox in my garden - I do hope it has some visitors in the coming weeks!

Jennifer Coombs, Northampton

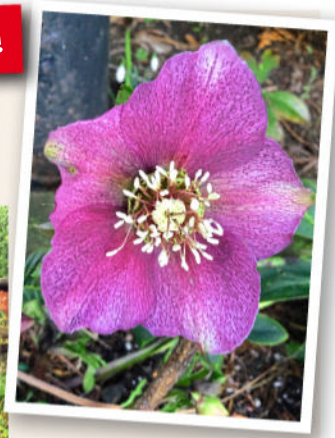
Best of this week's short & sweets!

So pleased with my amaryllis – it has eight blooms!

Merche Gardiner, Ipswich

Winter colour from cornus and nandina on a rare sunny day.

Barbara Clements, Norfolk



The hellebores are looking great this winter.

Margaret Crutchley, Nantwich, Cheshire

GET IN TOUCH!

We love hearing about what you're up to in your gardens. Write and tell us about your success – and failures, or why not share your green-fingered tips and gardening hacks with other readers. If you can, send us photos too. Here's how to get in touch...

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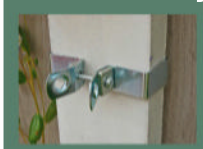
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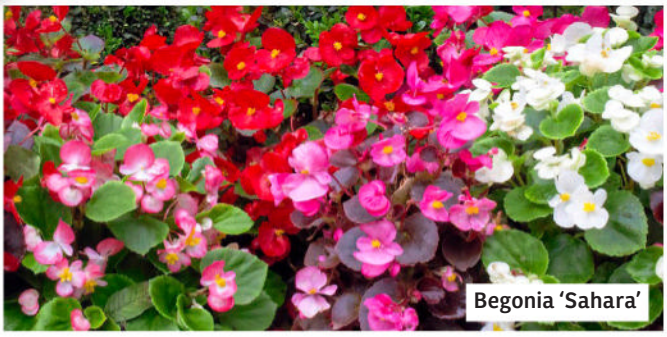
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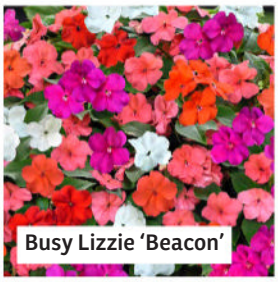
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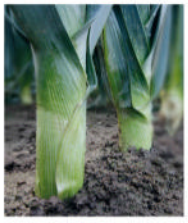

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16025	English Bluebell (Hyacinthoides non-scripta) 50 Bulbs In The Green ~~£29.98~~	£19.99		
KC8501	Winter Aconite 25 Bulbs In-The-Green ~~£17.99~~	£14.99		
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KB3789	Spring Bulbs In-The-Green Collection 100 Bulbs (Snowdrops Single x 25, Snowdrops Double x 25, Bluebells x 25, Winter Aconite x 25) ~~£61.96~~	£32.99		
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