

# Outdoors/gardening

## Dear Alan...

Some of my plants look very sad after the cold frosts and snow that we got in December. Shall I cut them back now or should I wait until spring?

L Matthews

Although some plants will look very sorry for themselves now it is best to hold back a while as we could still get quite a bit of bad weather yet and even the dead tops will protect the all important buds lower down on plants. Of course some half hardy plants and all annuals will not survive and these are best removed right away. Only time will tell how much damage has been done and it is best to wait until late spring before cutting back to just above new shoots that will (hopefully) appear lower down.

## Things to do this weekend

### Devote a bit of time for wildlife in your garden

■ Plant shrubs and trees that will provide food and shelter for wildlife in winter. Rowan, Cotoneaster, Berberis, Amelanchier, Crataegus, Buddleja, Crab apples, Pyracantha, ivy and hollies are good examples. Image attached AD

■ Make sure that there is always fresh water available for birds.

■ Supply a range of bird food to cater for all types of birds; mixed seed on tables, meal worms for robins, fat balls for the tit family, peanuts for finches, fruit and cheese for thrushes and blackbirds, etc., etc.

■ Regularly clean feeders and tables with Growing Success Natures Disinfectant to prevent disease spread.

■ Make a log or rock pile in a quiet corner to act as a wildlife refuge

■ Spend a bit of time giving your indoor plants a make-over

■ Why not liven up the room with a houseplant?

■ For the living room with good light; Ficus - weeping fig, Kalanchoe - flaming katy, Asparagus ferns

■ For living room with poorer light; Spathiphyllum - peace lily, Asplenium, Kentia or Areca Palm

■ For halls/landings good light but draughty; Syngonium - goose foot, Hedera - ivy, Chlorophytum - spider plant

■ For halls/landings poor light but draughty; Aspidistra - cast iron plant, Howea - Kentia palm, Fatsia - castor oil plant

■ Conservatory or sunny window; Jasmine, Kalanchoe - flaming katy, Stephanotis - Madagascan jasmine

■ North facing windows; Saintpaulia - African Violet, Clivia - Kaffir Lily, Azalea

■ Central heating can dry out houseplants, so stand the pots in groups on a tray of damp Hydroleuca or pebbles. This will create a humid atmosphere around the plants but do avoid over watering and position them where they can make the most of the winter daylight.

■ Keep deadheading Cyclamen, African Violets, Christmas Cacti and Azaleas to encourage more flowers to open. Don't forget to keep Cyclamen and Azaleas as cool as possible for prolonged flowering.

■ Group plants together, the display will look better, but more importantly they grow better together as a group.

■ Feed indoor plants monthly; but make sure the root ball is wet first, if not give water first!



Heather's late winter blazing colour make for a warming February scene

## Lucky heather! February flowerers are just the remedy for late winter

### Cleeve Nursery Tips with ALAN DOWN



While technically, we are still in January, I want to tell you about the garden trade's plant of the month...

but for February! Forgive me for jumping the gun but this is a really useful group of garden plants and I can't wait another week to tell you about it!

Of all the so-called "winter flowering" plants just one or two stand out! My plant of the week (Cyclamen coum) is one and heathers that flower now are others.

Many winter flowering pansies, violas, and primroses have really taken a caning after the exceptionally cold December. Not so heathers! They are as tough as old boots and, for most gardeners in this locality, have the added advantage of being tolerant to the alkaline soils that are common throughout the region. Add to this the fact that they are long lived and require very little maintenance, you can see that they have an awful lot

going for them! There are masses of varieties of winter heathers but most belong to two species. Yes, there are those from the fynbos Southern Cape region of South Africa but most of these lack the hardiness that our winters demand. The two groups to plant here are Erica carnea and E. x darleyensis. The carneas tend to be more ground hugging and generally only 20-30cm high, whereas the x darleyensis varieties end up at 30-40cms high. Of course, regularly pruning with shears immediately after the flowers have faded in spring keeps both types more compact.

Neither group is really happy in shade but light dappled shade (perhaps from a birch tree) is tolerated. All have very wispy fibrous surface roots and shoots that touch the ground often take root so that the whole effect is of an annual weed smothering mat forming within a short number of years.

Groups of plants of the same variety should be planted together and this is definitely a plant that should be planted in clumps to eventually knit together and form a clump. Space them all around 30cms apart but, if you are impatient and want to get quicker ground cover, they can be planted closer together. Fortunately, the cost of each plant is low and most plant retailers offer a generous multi-buy discount. Compared to say bed-

### With masses of brightly coloured flowers, heathers give a good display'

ding plants, which will need to be replanted at least once a year, heathers soon look a very economical alternative!

With masses of brightly coloured flowers from December to late March and the added attraction of copper or golden leaf varieties, heathers give a good display.

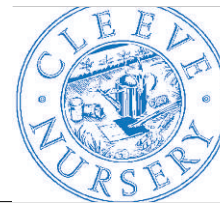
Those that say they look dull when not in flower should consider adding large flowered Clematis to the scheme. These will scramble over the top of the heathers and provide dra-

matic colour throughout the heather's off season. Choose varieties that perform best when hard pruned annually and don't be afraid to get in there with the secateurs and do your annual Clematis pruning early!

Spring and autumn flowering bulbs are natural choices to under-plant with too. I have the native daffodil Narcissus lobularis in my heather bed and it is happily seeding itself and colonising the whole area. In autumn the Naked Ladies [autumn blooming Crocus] pop through too.

Shapely dwarf conifers planted amongst them may hark back to 1960's planting styles but maybe it is time for a revival of this very natural partnership of conifer and heather to return, after-all that is exactly what one sees when you find them growing in the wild!

Finally, although Erica carnea and x darleyensis varieties tolerate limey soils, both are much happier if planted with a generous helping of a lime free compost of some sort. Pine bark is naturally acidic as is cocoa shell and your newly planted heathers will be set off beautifully with a weed suppressing and moisture retaining mulch of these on the surface.



With Cleeve Nursery's **Alan Down** Contact Alan at Cleeve Nursery, near Bristol, on 01934 832134. If you would like to ask Alan Down a gardening question, visit [www.cleevenursery.co.uk](http://www.cleevenursery.co.uk) and click on the Ask Us A Question tab. Alan can answer only emailed questions



## The plant that just keeps on surprising

### PLANT OF THE WEEK: CYCLAMEN COUM

It never ceases to amaze me just how tough this little feller is! The more common autumn flowering variety Cyclamen hederifolium has the sense to produce its' flowers in autumn, but not coum, it waits until the shortest days, the coldest nights and the dreariest of weather before it begins to bloom!

This is a true gem and should really be planted in every garden.

You won't find dried corms of this species for sale as they are tiny and in any case it is far easier to get it going

by planting out established pot grown plants. These are raised from seed and, once established in your garden, will slowly colonise an area and steadily spread.

The dainty blooms are shades of pink, cerise and white and can be produced in such quantities to produce a carpet of colour. Unlike their more common autumn flowering hardy relative, the flowers and leaves appear together. Some of these leaves are beautifully marked with silver or even coloured pewter all over. These are the most desirable of all and should be snapped up whenever you find them!



## Plot Lines with FIONA SANDERSON

Outside the kitchen window this morning I can hear a blackbird piping a long call of territorial supremacy.

Buds on the quince bush are opening up, and as the days seem noticeably a little longer, I can feel my own spring sap rising too. This usually means it's time to be out on the allotment making preparations for the coming season and gently limbering up the gardening muscles.

Fruit trees and canes that have been resting through the winter months will soon be springing out too, so this is a good time to be looking them over and finishing the pruning that will give them the strength to provide a good crop in later months. Different fruits

require different types of pruning, and it's worth having a book on this subject which explains it all in clear detail. 'Pruning and Training' by Christopher Brickell and David Joyce is one I return to every year. In general, though, pruning now will give the tree, bush or cane the structure that you want it to keep throughout the year. It's about thinning out overcrowded branches so that new growth will be stronger, and receive more light. It's also about reducing the length of main branches, and seeing to any winter damaged branches, or diseased wood, which needs cutting back to healthy tissue.

Some fruits, like the grapevine, or the plum tree, need to be pruned before the sap rises, as they 'bleed' too much otherwise. Redcurrants and gooseberries, which fruit from old wood, should be pruned to be kept 'open' and branches trimmed

back to a fruiting spur. Blackcurrants are different, they need to have the darkest, oldest branches cut out, at ground level, to prevent overcrowding, and to encourage plenty of new growth, on multiple stems. 'Tip' pruning, pruning at the top of the branches, shouldn't be necessary.

If that all sounds complicated, it often helps to have a good look at the bush or tree in a question to see what its growing habits are, and to act on your common sense.

Raspberries are a good example of this. Autumn and summer fruiting canes may look just the same, and yet they need to be pruned differently. If you think it through, the autumn raspberries need to have their fruiting delayed, so cutting all canes back to ground level now will mean that the plant has to grow again first. Conversely you don't want to delay the summer berries, even by a day, so cutting out the old canes, and weak shoots, to ground level, and only tip pruning last year's freshly grown canes, will speed vigorous early fruiting.

One way to learn more about pruning is to have a go with an experienced gardener. There are lots of gardening courses running in different parts of the city. I've just heard about 'Grow Grub', a monthly course running on the Talbot Rd allotments, aimed at new allotmenters, and also a weekly course for adults with young children, called 'Grow grubby'.

These both sound great and are priced very reasonably. You can find out more from Becky Thoburn, at [growgrubby@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:growgrubby@yahoo.co.uk) or call 0755 2667 144

## Interpreting West's lost gardens

In a year-long project, Cornish artist James Eddy will work with the Lost Gardens of Heligan to interpret the essence of the gardens as part of the celebrations marking the 21st anniversary of their re-discovery.

Using as his themes *Lost and Found* and *Growth and Decay* James has spent the winter researching and exploring Heligan in order to understand and absorb the garden's unique atmosphere and diversity. Many observational drawings have been made and a sculpture preview exhibition takes place from February 19-27.

Lorna Tremayne from Heligan believes the Lost Gardens have inspired many artists and sculptors over the years and this art has helped further enhance visitors' experiences.

"In celebration of the gardens' anniversary we wanted to continue this theme with a sculpture project that our visitors could engage with and follow throughout the year," she says.

The response to the exhibition will be an essential part of the creative process before sculpture work begins in the summer.

### TO COME >

Don't miss our Tuesday gardening section with expert comment and tips from our columnist Dirty Nails aka Joe Nasham



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