

Outdoors/gardening

Dear Alan...

I purchased six raspberry canes from you a couple of years ago, they have produced a lovely crop, but unfortunately I forgot to cut them down this winter (they stand about 3ft tall) and they are starting to bud. Would I damage them if I cut them down now?

Another question: I purchased a Wisteria from you around four years ago and, although it flowers each year, it has not really grown. Is there a feed you can recommend?

Pat White

It is not too late to prune your raspberry canes, but you should only cut the autumn-fruiting varieties, such as Autumn Bliss, down to the ground now (all the canes). If you are growing summer fruiting varieties, the crop will be produced on the canes now coming into leaf, so you should not prune those! Thin them out by all means, say, 10-15cm minimum between each cane that you leave. Wisteria can take a while to settle down but often the problem is too much leaf and shoot growth and no flowers! However, a high potash feed will encourage flowering and high nitrogen will encourage more shoots and leaves. I suggest that you give your Wisteria an application of sulphate of ammonia or of chicken manure pellets and follow that up with monthly liquid feeds of Miracle-Gro until July.



Things to do this weekend

- Roll lawns (slowly!) to even out bumps. This is especially effective when the soil is moist
- Reshape lawn edges using a sharp half moon lawn edging iron. Consider installing lawn edging to support the edges.
- Prune bougainvillea quite hard now. Jasmine and Plumbago can be thinned out by removing the oldest shoots.
- Re-pot fuchsias, pelargoniums and other over-wintered tender plants. Cut away any dead shoots and prune back to strong shoots near the base where ever possible.
- Sow parsnip seeds into a firm fine seedbed. F1 Albion does well and has good resistance to canker.
- Protect early flowers on peaches, nectarines and apricots from frost. A curtain of polythene may be all that is needed. Pollinate blooms with a very soft brush.
- Plant grape vines now. Our local soil suits them if well drained. Plant in the sunniest place.
- Buy net pot plants of tender perennials and pot them on with a bit of frost protection. Varieties such as argyranthemum, diascia, nemesia, verbena, bacopa and masses of others will flower all summer and represent fantastic value.
- Cut old flowering shoots and flowers from miscanthus grasses. Rake dead leaves out of evergreen grasses to thin them out and allow new shoots to come through unhindered.
- Prune most roses now, (climbing, rambling and shrub roses are best pruned in summer after the main flush of flower). Cut back to 6-8in from the ground and cut just above a bud, prune out any branches that are crossing to leave an open centre. Remove any root suckers as close to the roots as possible (neatly tearing them off discourages more). Cut out any weak, dead or diseased shoots.



- Lift crowded snowdrops, carefully divide and replant. Avoid breaking their delicate roots if possible.
- Start large flowered and cascading begonia corms into growth by planting them on the surface of multipurpose compost in warmth now. Plant the indented concave side upwards as this is where the shoots will appear.
- Remove flower heads from daffodils as they finish flowering. A liquid feed with a liquid tomato fertiliser helps next years flowers to form now. Check for snail damage too.



Choisy 'Sundance' was cultivated by Peter Catt in his garden in Hampshire and is now a staple for many gardeners PICTURE: FREIA TURLAND

Arriba, arriba! Invite the sun of Mexico into your garden

Cleeve Nursery Tips with ALAN DOWN



Mexican Orange Blossom, as its name implies, was introduced to Britain from Mexico almost 200 years ago and now is one of the most common evergreen shrubs in our gardens. You might think that coming from that part of the world it would struggle in our cold winters, but not a bit of it – it takes our much damper and colder climate in its stride! The most common type is still Choisya ternata, but the golden leaf variety 'Sundance', which is a selection of this, must be giving it a run for its money!

Both types are equally happy in full sun or part shade where their neat rounded shape and, in spring, strongly scented white flowers can fill the garden with scent.

The gold leaf variety 'Sundance' has an interesting background since it began life in the garden of a friend in Hampshire. Peter Catt spotted just one tiny yellow leaflet on an otherwise normal green bush and decided to take a cutting. This rooted successfully, and new shoots appeared with there gradually becoming more and more yellow leaves

until the whole thing turned yellow. At this stage, no other yellow leaf Mexican Orange Blossom had been seen anywhere in the world! Realising that he was on to something, he successfully patented this and set about licensing its distribution around the world. Now, 25 years later, with tens of thousands of this delightfully bright shrub in gardens, we should just pause a moment and thank Peter for his sharp eyes and skill that brought us this beautiful evergreen shrub!

More recently, other new varieties have followed with Peter Moore, also from Hampshire, giving us the finely cut-leaf variety 'Aztec Pearl' in 1982! This is a very elegant evergreen which, I think, looks particularly good in a contemporary setting. It too has scented white spring blossom. Not satisfied with this, he soon bred an improvement which is still quite new. This is called White Dazzler and one that we grow and like in our nursery here at Cleeve.

Like the other Peter, he was quick to spot the potential of a yellow leaf form of this and named his find Goldfingers! Although exceptionally



Choisy 'White Dazzler' makes a superb container plant

striking to look at, we find this one to be more of a challenge to grow well. I'm sure that others new varieties will follow, and that they too will have strongly scented white flowers but I almost forgot to mention that the leaves are aromatic too!

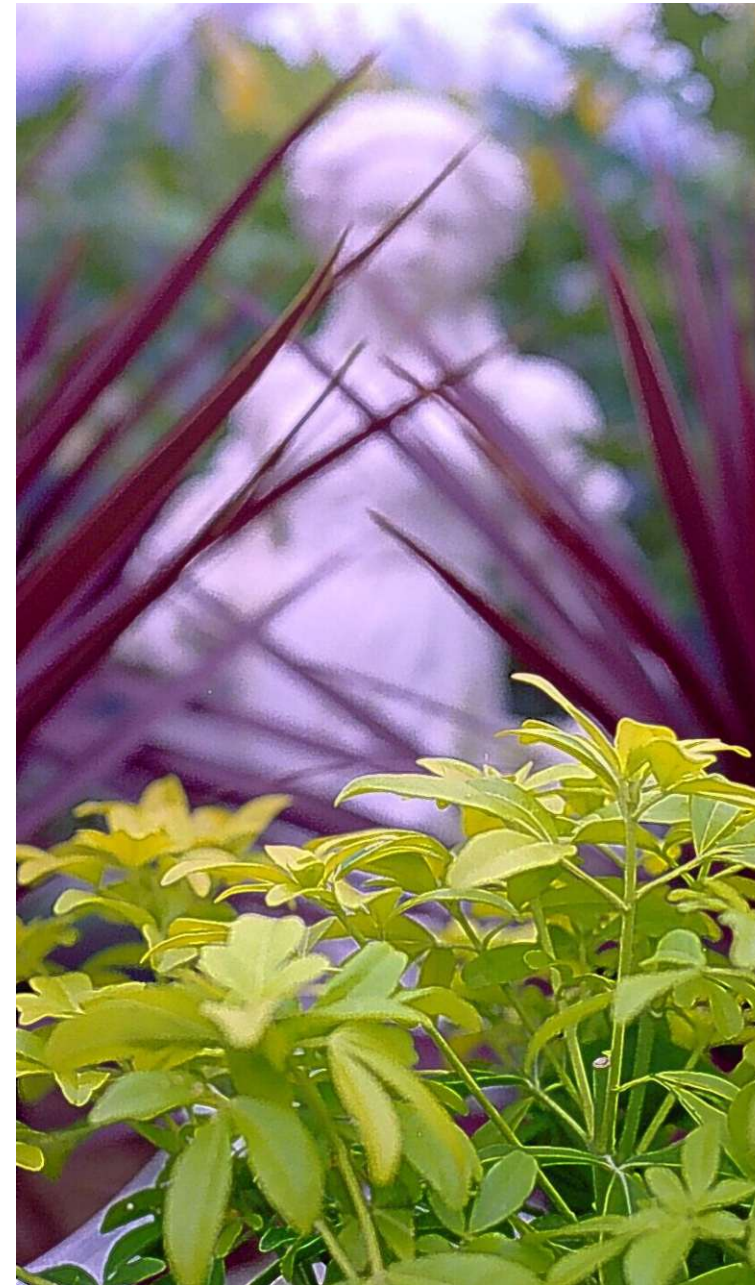
The cut leaf forms 'Aztec Pearl', 'White Dazzler' and 'Goldfingers' all make superb permanent container plants and, I think, are best placed in full sun. The larger 'Sundance' and its parent Choisy ternata can be grown in really large pots and trimmed after flowering to keep them neat. However, they lend themselves more to sunny or shady borders with no great demands on the soil type or indeed on the gardener to grow them!



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 and click on the Ask Us A Question tab. Alan can answer only emailed questions



Choisy ternata, above and top, is the most common variety in this country. Right: Choisy 'Sundance' contrasts nicely with Cordylian 'Red Star'



Whether it's fruit or veg, it's rhubarb time

PLANT OF THE WEEK: RHUBARB

Is it a fruit, is it a vegetable, who knows and, more to the point does it matter anyway? Rhubarb is one of the very first harvests of the new season. If you already have rhubarb established on your allotment or in the garden then you will soon be harvesting stems. These have been enticed to grow by the warming temperatures and, perhaps by your encouragement of an application of manure or garden compost around each plant a few weeks ago. You may be fortunate enough to have proper terracotta forcing pots, which I hope are in better condition than my own. Mine are held together with wire. They have long since lost their beautifully made lids that fit neatly onto the top of the forcing pots to exclude light and make those stems inside reach even higher to try to find some daylight. Of course you don't have to have forcing pots as good, but later, crops will appear without them.

Rhubarb is a very undemanding plant and, after a couple of seasons of establishment when you must resist the temptation to pull any stems, will go on cropping for tens of years. It is



not troubled by many serious pests or diseases, although snails seem to be impervious to the toxins that rhubarb leaves contain, but you must keep a sharp watch out for flower buds. When and if these appear they push up between the leaves like a clenched fist and it is best to snap or cut them as soon as you see them. If you fail to do this and allow the tall,

but not unattractive flower stem to develop and then remove it, you are left with a gaping hole from the hollow stem that can fill up with water and eventually lead to the rootstock rotting away. If you don't have rhubarb in your garden, then now is a good time to plant it and there should be plenty around this week.

Plot Lines with FIONA SANDERSON



Suddenly it seems like the time for really getting on with gardening has arrived. Clear sunny days do make it seem as if spring is imminent... hooray... and that there's not a moment to lose.

But those clear days and night frosts must mean that the soil temperature is going up and down like a yo-yo, especially in the sunny spots that warm up most quickly. Quite an extreme start for any new little plant that is just emerging. Lettuce, radish, peas, broad beans, spinach and beetroot can all be sown outdoors in March, in areas that you can keep clear of slug attack, but there's a high risk of losing them to the elements and having to start again.

Sowing them indoors is safer, but does mean that you'll have to find a fair amount of windowsill space over the next month or so!

I use the green shelving from my temporary greenhouse, minus cover. The shelves will now enjoy a few weeks' holiday in my sitting room, near the big window, where there is plenty of light. I'd really like two sets of shelves, but that might be stretching family goodwill a bit too far. So far, the tomatoes, spinach and leeks are all looking happy there, and because they get plenty of light in that spot, they don't grow all spindly. It's now that you realise how many more square pots you can fit into a space, compared with round ones. I can never get enough

square pots! Root trainers are one very compact system for growing seeds. These give a great depth of soil for parsnips, scorzoneria and beans, all of which can be sown now. I get very impatient with the flimsy plastic modules that are generally sold for seed raising. They get brittle with age and aren't really up to the job of raising plants for more than one season. They are horrible to clean, they split easily... in fact, why do I put up with them? Maybe this is the year when I will stop using flimsy plastic modules altogether, in favour of tougher alternatives.

The cheapest of these is a length of guttering, the sort that graces full skips. Previously, I've used these lengths for sowing peas. It also works well for lettuce, whose roots don't like disturbance either. The theory is that, once they are ready to transplant, you just slide the whole lot out. This is an acquired skill. Shorter lengths of gutter can be cut to fit a seed tray, or fit into supermarket fruit boxes. The boxes prevent too much compost 'spill' from the open ends, although tin cans or cut off bottle ends also make good 'stops'. If you think about the cross section shape of guttering, it allows for good root growth without a lot of compost waste, and keeps the water around the roots of your seedlings better than deeper modules. They are robust enough to last for years, too, and easy to clean.

Dig It, Grow It, Cook It, Eat It

Tough times with rising food and fuel prices could prompt many more South Somerset gardeners to expand production of home-grown fruit and veg this spring, writes **Nick Cater**, of the Somerset Waste Partnership.

And leading the way in this new and very green drive to grow your own grub will be some young recruits to the gardening game in the form of hundreds of Somerset students

taking part in the "Dig It, Grow It, Cook It, Eat It" competition.

The contest is led by Somerset's leading green charity, the Carymoor Environmental Trust, based in Dimmer. Backing for the contest comes from the recycling and waste management company Viridor, which gives each school taking part a tonne of the Revive compost it creates from Somerset's garden waste.

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