

Outdoors/gardening



Dear Alan...

Last spring we purchased a 6ft Cordyline [Torbay Palm] with three main stems, each having multiple heads. The garden centre told us it was frost hardy, but to tie the leaves together to protect the crown during extreme cold. This I did, but it seems that the frost has got to both heads on one stem, four out of five on the other and just one on the third. The crown and some of the trunk have gone soft and the leaves dropped out. Will this recover? Should I cut it down to a part of the trunk which is firmer? If so, when?

Mr J Monk
Sadly, this is an all-too familiar sight and we have several very large and small plants that have exactly the same look to them. I think it may be due to a succession of colder winters but for over 20 years this plant has come through British winters unscathed. You may find that new shoots will appear in late spring lower down the trunk. Bear in mind that the new shoots will need protection next winter. Any soft tops of the trunks will not recover and should be cut off.

Alan's tips for things to do in the garden this weekend

- When snowdrops finish flowering lift crowded clumps, carefully divide them and replant immediately.
- Check that climbers are securely tied to their supports and check that old ties are not constricting older thicker stems. It's a good time to take a look at tree ties and loosen them a little so that they are not beginning to garrotte swelling trunks. Prevent them slipping down both the tree and the stake by nailing the tie to the stake.
- Prune Clematis. Those that flower after mid summer should be cut back hard [they only flower on newly grown shoots] but those that flower

planks to spread your weight. Growing in raised beds avoids this problem.

- Spray peaches, apricots and nectarines against peach leaf curl disease and cherries against bacterial canker. Use Bayer protective fungicide for both. Attach a sheet of polythene to act as a curtain to help protect wall-trained specimens against infection and to improve the fruit set.
- Apply sulphate of potash to fruit to encourage good fruit growth. If your fruit trees are growing amongst grass, apply sulphate of ammonia too.
- It's not too late to mulch beds and borders to suppress weeds and trap in moisture. Use spent mushroom compost or farmyard manure on heavy soils or for a more decorative finish use chipped pine bark.
- Could your garden look better? This is the month when it is stripped to the basic skeleton by winter and when you can assess whether an evergreen shrub, conifer or tree or perhaps an archway, pergola or statue would improve things.
- Construct a cold frame to get early crops going.



before mid summer should be more lightly pruned to about 75cm. The smaller flowered and species Clematis generally only need pruning to confine them to the space you have for them.

- Prepare for and plant new roses and fruit trees. It's the traditional time to plant and they will be partly established when spring arrives. If planting where the same species has grown before, add Root Grow root friendly fungi to the planting hole.
- Drench Delphiniums, Gypsophila, Hostas, Lupins, Clematis and other slug and snail prone plants with Slug Clear liquid. Lots of slugs live in the soil and this will sort them out!
- Top dress rhubarb and spring cabbage with sulphate of ammonia.
- Avoid compressing wet soil when planting and sowing by working off



- Sow sweet peas in long tube pots or Rootainers.
- Buy plug bedding plants to take home and grow on in cell packs. These can even be grown on the windowsill for a while.
- Add Osmocote granules to your permanently planted pots. This gradually feeds for 5-6 months.



Alan uses lengths of rainwater gutter and fills them with seed compost, sowing the seed as if it were going into a row in the veg plot

Action stations: repair work and pest awareness are key

Cleeve Nursery Tips with ALAN DOWN



As I write this, winter's grip is loosening! Hawthorn buds are bursting in the hedgerows and primroses and celandines are opening their cheerful faces on the banks below.

In my garden, Hellebores are opening their nodding heads among snowdrops and early blooming daffodils. Oh, and the gardening jobs are really beginning to pile up! This week you will notice that there are more of my tips for the weekend than previously - and that trend will continue.

I have been trying to catch up and replace losses caused by the hard winter. Some plants are best left to see whether they are going to recover (see top left) but others need to be replanted or sown right away.

Take for instance broad beans or peas. These, especially if sown too early or in a cold spot, have taken a real hammering. But seed sown now could catch up provided that you have somewhere light and warm to grow them.

I use lengths of rainwater gutter and fill them with seed compost, sowing the seed as if it were going into a row in the veg plot. When germinated, growing strongly and hardened off, I slide the whole con-

gun! It is certainly a very disfiguring pest!

Also high up this top ten are cushion scale and chafer grubs on lawns. Often the first indication of your garden having these pests is a by-product of them being there. With the cushion scale; evergreen leaves of Camellia, Aucuba, holly, bay laurel and evergreen Euonymus becomes sticky and blackened. This is as a result of the sticky substance that is excreted by the limpet-looking pest which is usually hidden on the underside of leaves. But with chafer grubs, the first sign of trouble is damaged areas and small, and not so small, areas of your lawn being uprooted! Jackdaws and magpies may cause the small holes but badgers can make your lawn look overnight as though it has been visited by a herd of pigs! What they are both after is the fat, white and juicy chafer grub that is feeding on and seriously damaging your grass roots!

The Royal Horticultural Society recently announced its top ten pests and for the first time Viburnum beetle has nudged slugs and snails off

'The Viburnum beetle is still a novelty pest'

the number one spot!

Now I reckon that has more to do with the weather last year and the fact that Viburnum beetle is still a novelty pest. Slugs and snails are still out there, they are just not flavour of the month!

The dry spring last year would certainly have reduced the number of them and kept them in check whilst our youngest and tastiest plants were getting established! The Viburnum beetle chews away at the leaves with the result that a shrub looks as if someone has had a go at it with a shot

gun! It is certainly a very disfiguring pest!

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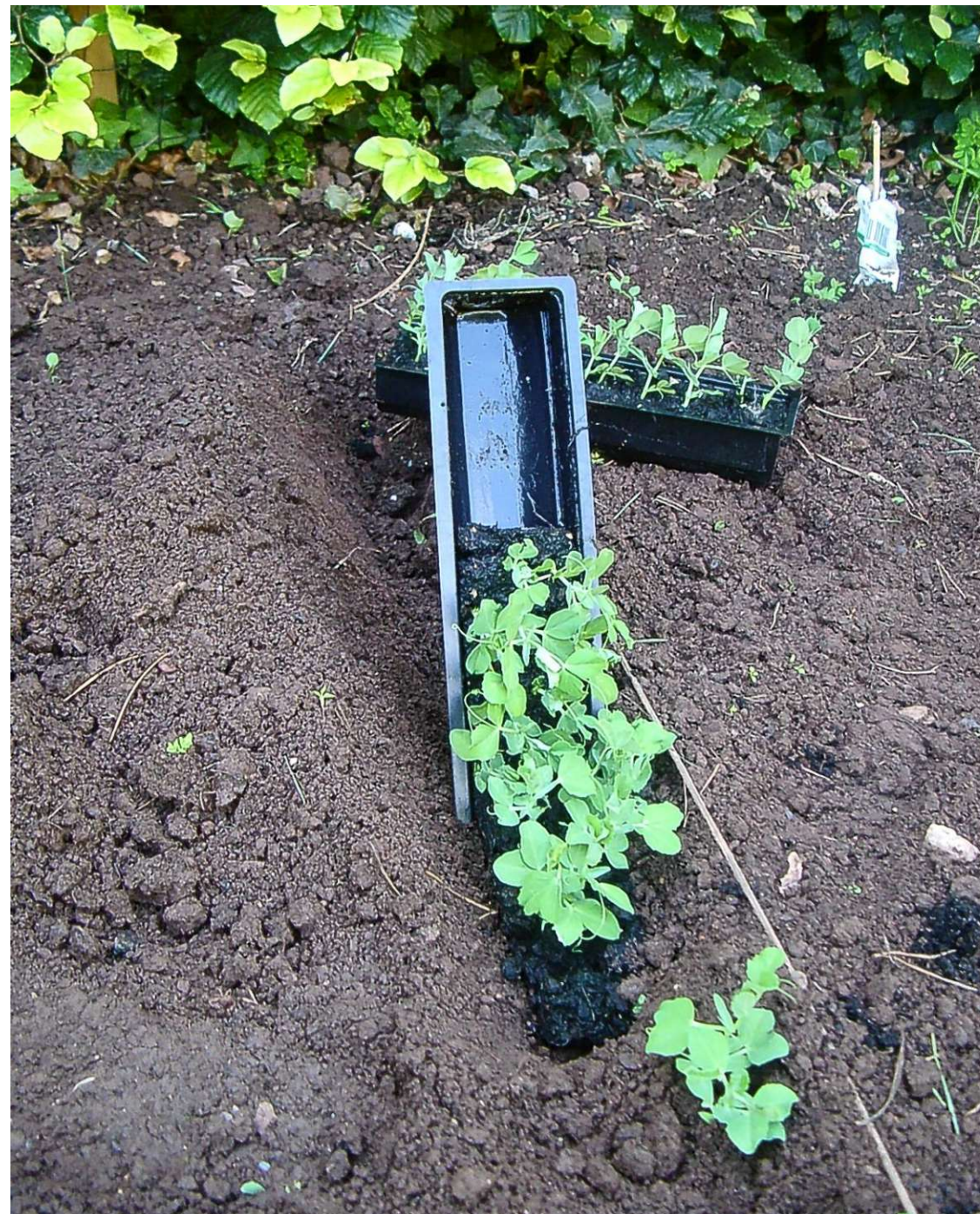
The rest of the top 10 is made up of the normal suspects of lily beetle, vine weevil, ants and glasshouse red spider mite.

Other newer pests Horse chestnut scale and Harlequin ladybird make up the ten but I think we need to bear in mind that this is a list of what gardeners have asked advice on most of all and not necessarily what pests are most common.

I have little doubt that, if we get a wet spring this year, slugs and snails will be reclaiming that top of the pops spot again!



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



Alan Down writes: 'I have been trying to catch up and replace losses caused by the hard winter'

Primroses, the charge of the bright brigade

PLANT OF THE WEEK: PRIMROSE

So widely known that they hardly need any description from me, primroses are just what our gardens need after such a cold and dreary winter!

Every year there are new colours and even larger blooms but, no matter what the plant breeders do to this little charmer, there is nothing that comes even close to them to brighten up a border, pot or window box!

Planted now, they will go on flowering until we can safely plant out tender summer flowering bedding plants. An added bonus is that when they have finished flowering, they can be transplanted to a shaded border where they invariably settle in and continue to give many more years of pleasure!

Some, especially the yellow shades, are heavily and sweetly fragrant and these are well worth planting close to your door.



Plot Lines with FIONA SANDERSON



The world would be a much blander place without the onion family. Leeks, white and red onions, garlic, chives, spring onions and shallots are the most widely grown examples, and just imagine cooking without them.

The end of February is a good time to be sowing spring onion seed, and this is always a good psychological moment, when it seems as if the new growing season has finally begun. It's also a good time to be putting in shallots. I'm always surprised how few gardeners choose to grow them. They are possibly my favourite onion, and this is for a number of reasons.

The first is flavour, always the best reason for growing your own. Shallots are not just ordinary onions on a smaller scale, they have a different flavour which is more pungent and mouth watering. I think. The difference between them is much like that between, let's say, an ordinary chocolate bar, and a proper chocolate. Both are good, but it's probably the richer, more intense one that you'll crave.

Secondly, shallots are quite hardy and pest free, which means that they are much more likely to succeed in gardens and on allotments that are troubled by slugs and the bird brigade. They need to be planted so that the top is just below the soil. This means that they are hidden from birds who will spot any tops sticking out and pull them right out. Some gardeners recommend scooping out the soil, and popping

the shallot in, then replacing the soil firmly around, rather than just pushing the shallot in, which then compacts the soil just where tiny roots are going to try to emerge. This makes good sense to me.

My next reason for liking shallots is the way they will grow and divide into clusters, giving you several, and sometimes many shallots, in return for each one originally planted. They are just one of a number of 'multiplier' onions, including Welsh onions, garlic, and, I think, tree onions, which all do this, although the tree onion produces new little ones at the top of a stem, rather than underground. This process of multiplication is the best kind of dividend, you get your original investment back, with extra to use, and then a bit more to save for next year's planting.

I particularly like the banana shallots, which grow a little larger, have a wonderful shape for slicing into salads, quartering on to pizzas, or just roasting whole. They are also easier to peel than the little tight wrapped rounder versions. You can find them for sale as sets in garden centres etc, but I've also had success with ones I've found in the greengrocer's.

One of my favourite ways to cook them is to quarter them and fry them slowly till soft, in good oil, then add a little sugar, herbs and some red wine, and cook until reduced. This makes a wonderful rich sauce to go with other roasted vegetables, or a pie and mash.

Good enough to eat

CREATING AN ASPARAGUS BED

Allotment holders with plenty of space and even more patience may consider growing this delicious permanent crop, which needs a sunny and sheltered site to protect the tender spears which are harvested in spring.

Prepare the soil by digging a trench around 15cm (6in) deep and earthing up a ridge in its centre. Buy two-year-old asparagus 'crowns' from garden centres and spread the roots out over the ridge, filling in the trench with a soil and grit mix.

Cover the crowns with the gritty mixture so that they are 10cm/4in below the soil surface, keep the crowns well watered and mulch with a thick layer of compost in early

spring to protect the emerging spheres. Don't pick the asparagus in the first year. Cut it down to the base when the foliage dies down in the autumn, weed thoroughly and mulch again. In the second year, pick a few spears and then take what you want in the third year, picking plenty of spears to encourage more buds to grow from the crown, but only for a six-week period from mid April onwards.

With your allotment, always check the soil to assess how much work you'll need to do to improve it. Make sure the plot has plenty of sun or you'll be seriously limited as to what you can grow. Check water supplies, access to your plot and whether you may be allowed to erect a shed, which is vital for keeping tools and seeds.



A lovely piece of asparagus



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