

An exciting time with new ideas

Spring threatens to rise phoenix like from the ashes and darkness of winter. The bare bones of trees assert their form against the lengthy evening skies and a new year begins for the gardeners amongst us.

This is an exciting time for new ideas and expectations to be built on the accomplishments of last year. Gardeners amongst us fall mainly into one of two categories those whose space is decorated with plants and those whose plants are decorated with space. I fall into the former ie., a designer who loves plants and so apologise in advance to those gardeners who find my choice of plants predictable or uninspired.

Why is the garden so important to us? Is it an oasis of peace, a spiritual haven in an otherwise turbulent and volatile world? Is it the last vestige of physical contact with our natural world, or is it an extension of our living space, an outside adjunct to our homes?

I suspect that it is part of all these and much more. How do we achieve a sympathetic space in which to enjoy our outdoor living? We are bombarded with so many programmes on style that it would be easy to think that a satisfactory outcome would be relatively simple to achieve, however the opposite is more often the case. Style programmes do not necessarily deal with style but with decoration and so often our gardens become an eclectic conglomeration of decorative elements without the essentials of form or style.

This is the perfect time of year to look at our gardens stripped to their bare bones and ask ourselves if we are happy with the underlying structure. Although too late to start major construction without disrupting the garden it is an ideal time to move many shrubs and trees which could be in the wrong place.

If we consider for a moment plants which bring colour to the garden at this time of year it is worth observing that groups of plants placed together for their colour and structure place a more substantial quality weight in the garden than the scattergun approach where planting is carried out at random in any available space. Prunus Autumnalis, a beautiful small tree which flowers with semi-double white to pink flowers during mild spells from November to March when under-planted with the evergreen Daphne Bholua Jacqueline Postil a heavily scented and deeper pink flower and this again under-planted with the silvery leafed and pale to deep pink Cyclamen Coum. When planted together in such a grouping as this, a much stronger accent is created in the garden as oppose to planting in isolation.

VALUABLE GROUP

This late winter group can be further enhanced with a yellow flowering Hamamelis; a valuable group of winter flowering shrubs several of which are heavily scented ie., the pale sulphur yellow of Hamamelis Pallida and the more compact growing Arnold Promise, another heavily scented yellow form is a variety called Doerac, which holds its strong yellow flowers against its dark brown dead leaves which it keeps until spring. The orange and red forms of Hamamelis also have the advantage of strong autumn colours which in the smaller garden make

Preparing for Spring at Larch Cottage Nurseries

with owner Peter Stott



them more garden worthy. Probably one of the best reds is a variety called Diane and Aphrodite is one of the newer orange hybrids well worth a place in most gardens. It is worth mentioning that Hamamelis need a slightly acid soil to perform well. A more unusual group of shrubs which do well in the sheltered garden and are related to the Daphnes are the Edgeworthias which flower as terminal clusters on bare wood with strong scent.

Another small tree worth considering is a newer hybrid of the Cercis family a variety called Avondale which carries clusters of small pea flowers, a strong cerise against dark bare stems. When the leaves do emerge they are large heart shaped and glossy, a perfect foil for other shrubs etc.

Helleborus form one of the most exciting groups of perennial to be found in flower at this time of year. And much hybridisation has been carried out over the last few years to reinvent and extend the range of colour and flower form, particularly in the Orientalis group where it is possible to find from white to almost black forms in both singles and doubles. The Niger group have also benefited from hybridisation and some of the largest flower forms in both white and pink are found in this group. The Mischa types are probably the most outstanding recent varieties.

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN.

Last year was our first foray into a commercial organic vegetable garden with the specific intention of supplying our restaurant The Greenhouse.

Either by happy accident or good luck we had a most successful first season, keeping the kitchen going with a succession of salad and vegetables well into winter, and the Rocket managing to crop right through until now. Our purple sprouting broccoli is just starting to produce and this has reached tree like proportions. We seemed to have had most success with the Franchi vegetable seeds brought back from holiday in Italy but then the Italians always take their vegetables most seriously. Franchi seeds which are described by Jamie Oliver as 'Incredible veg seeds from Italy', are

now available for the first time at Larch Cottage Nurseries.

This year we are beginning to sow much sooner with the aid of cloches etc and indeed the garlic is growing away very strongly. Between these rows of garlic we will be planting carrots, which are susceptible to Root Fly. The flight of the Root takes them along the top of the soil where they actually smell out the carrots, garlic with its strong odour masks the scent of the carrot, so the root fly goes elsewhere. Last year this companion planting was most successful and we had no problem with root fly at all.

Following our success with vegetables, this year we are going to plant an area out for soft fruit and are going to experiment with Blueberry varieties which have the advantage of not only producing excellent fruit but have extremely good Autumn colour and can make pleasing accents in an ordinary shrub border which has the benefit of an acid soil.

Our compost heap seems to have developed into some kind of bottomless pit. We continue to fill it from kitchen waste and garden debris which at Larch Cottage is a not inconsiderable amount and although 3 bins were planned for a rotational basis we have never managed to get the first one to remain full yet.

JOBS TO DO IN MARCH

Fruit tree pruning should now be completed with branches only being removed to create shape and keep the centre of the trees open. Pruning to create fruit buds is done in August.

Roses are pruned now and although research shows that there is no difference in flower production between pruning with a hedge cutter and carefully selecting shoots to be cut with secateurs the latter produce a more aesthetically pleasing shrub.

Wisterias. A lot of people are most hesitant about pruning wisterias, and think that there is some magic in producing flowers. We are constantly asked how to get a wisteria to flower that has often been planted



SHOW OF COLOUR

Clockwise (from left) Silvery leafed Cyclamen Coum; The sulphur yellow Hamamelis Arnold Promise and the exciting Helleborus Orientalis Shades of the Night.

many years prior and resolutely refuses to flower. Wisterias and grape vines are pruned in the same way. All lateral branches at this time of year are shortened back

to either two or three buds, these branches should have been cut back to five or six buds in August to allow the remaining buds to swell and ripen.

Most wisterias if happy, grow with considerable vigour and until semi exhausted are not inclined to flower and so it is important that a framework of main branches is established which then become the main structure back to which pruning is done at these times of year.

As our summers are getting longer and the winters shorter a well pruned wisteria can confidently be expected to flower twice a year. The species Wisteria Sinensis often takes many years to flower and is often found in garden centres but it is the more modern hybrids of this that can be expected to flower early in life. The variety Prolific is an extremely floriferous lavender purple form which can be expected to flower twice a year.

The other branch of the wisteria family are the Floribundas or Japanese Wisteria and these generally produce the longest racemes of flower, the variety Macrobotrys often reaching a metre in length and again these can, with proper pruning, flower twice a year although the flowers are generally shorter in the autumn. An interesting fact is that the Sinensis or Chinese varieties twist anti-clockwise, whereas the Floribundas or Japanese Wisterias twist clockwise.

As mentioned before, grape vines are pruned in a similar manner, and our first year grapes planted last year also fruited with us and we confidently expect to be bottling 'Chateau Larch Cottage' in years to come!

Peter is to contribute to The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald on a Monthly basis as from April 2007. watch out for his hints and tips on the website.