



Green and pleasant

AS we approach Christmas at a rate of knots, we also reach the shortest day of the year on the 21st. I must confess to not enjoying working outside in the cold and wet at this time of the year. It really is a case of wrapping up well in order to keep warm outside. It's really important to check your plants winter protection and if you have a greenhouse make sure the heater is working. Hopefully, there are not too many jobs left to do outside, so you will have time for some fireside garden planning.

By **Geoff Stonebanks**

This is the month when cold, wet, windy winter weather can damage trees, shrubs and garden structures such as trellis. Be warned. Take time to check things out and aim to improve shelter for important plants, staking those that will benefit, mulch where needed and wrap pots where necessary!

Christmas in the garden

As the festive season approaches it is wonderful to have some plants in the garden that echo that theme too. One such shrub is pictured in the header. It is a glorious *Camellia x vernalis* 'Yuletide'. The plant pictured is in my garden was purchased in memory of an old friend, who passed away about

10 years ago, Peggy Wooton. It is a hybrid bushy, evergreen shrub with glossy dark green leaves and brilliant-red single flowers with prominent yellow stamens, borne in late winter and early spring. Mine always flowers just before Christmas and looks striking in its container behind the house. It is fully hardy, but to prevent damage to the emerging buds and flowers, it benefits from protection from cold, dry winds and early morning sun. It is important to water established plants in dry weather to prevent bud drop. It benefits from a feed in mid-spring and again in June. After flowering, you can lightly trim or prune any branches that spoil the overall appearance of the plant.

Their colouring is very striking — and is perfect for the build-up to the Christmas season, but the dark green foliage offers year-round structure and interest. If left to grow naturally,

this is a relatively compact shrub with a pyramidal habit, but it can also be trained against a wall, or grown in a large pot if space is at a premium.

If you have holly growing in the garden, as I do, you can harvest branches with berries for making Christmas garlands and wreaths or just fill vases for a festive touch indoors. It helps to stand the berry covered twigs in a bucket of water until you're ready to use them.

The perfect combination is the use of both holly and ivy in the house over the Christmas period. I'm lucky to have a plentiful supply of both which I can call upon. If you want to vary the look, you can always use spray cans of silver and gold paint to liven up the natural look. Branches of both can look very dramatic, carefully positioned along mantelpieces or creating a centre piece for the dining table. Mix in with a few baubles and maybe some ribbon and you'll be amazed what a difference it can make and at a fraction of the cost of shop bought decorations.

Jobs to do in the garden

If the weather holds and it's not too cold there are still quite a few jobs you could be getting on with in the garden. If you have any empty borders, they can be dug over ready for next year's planting.

It is always a good idea to group potted plants together, in a sheltered spot in the garden, to protect them from the harshest winter weather that is likely to come.

You can prune wisteria, by cutting back whipper summer side-shoots to two or three buds, some fruit trees benefit a winter prune too. Prune

climbing roses now, removing diseased or damaged growth and tying in any new shoots to their support. Prune older flowered side shoots back by two thirds of their length. You can prune your Japanese maple trees if needed, as they will bleed sap if pruning is done any later.

I always find there is a debate over whether to leave the faded flower heads on your hydrangeas or not. I do reckon that left until spring they will help to provide frost protection to the swelling buds further down the stems. I've got about 10 different hydrangeas around the garden at Driftwood and tend to leave the old head on until spring. They look quite pretty too with an edging of frost on a cold winter morning.

Keep checking over any stored dahlia tubers you may have, keeping an eye out for rot. Take care to check climbers and climbing shrubs so that they are securely attached to their supports with ties.

It is really important to look after the birds that visit your garden. Remember to clean feeders if you have them, stock up on wild bird food and make sure they have access to fresh water.

Read more of Geoff's garden at: www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk

Geoff's garden, Driftwood has appeared on BBC2 Gardeners' World, was a finalist in Gardeners' World Magazine Best Small Space and a finalist in Lewes District Business Awards 2018 as 'The Tourist Destination of the Year'. Read the amazing 5-star reviews on TripAdvisor. Amazing feature in Coast Magazine and an American magazine, Flea Market Garden Style. Read all about Geoff's trips to Buckingham Palace and Royal Garden Party in 2018 and his work for the community.