



Green and pleasant

THIS month brings with it the shortest day of the year and you will need to work hard to keep warm outside, maybe some digging or tree pruning. Keep an eye on your winter protection for equipment and plants. If you have a greenhouse, make sure the heater is working as it should. You may not have too many more jobs to do outside, if not you can spend some time with fireside garden planning. Keep an eye on the garden as cold, wet, windy winter weather can damage trees, shrubs and garden structures such as trellis. Seek to improve shelter, staking plants, mulching and wrapping pots to prevent damage.

By **Geoff Stonebanks**

Not got a Christmas tree yet? Prevent their premature needle drop by choosing a pine or fir tree instead of the traditional Norway spruce. They will hold their needles for longer which is always good news. Once in the house, avoid placing it near sources of heat such as a fire or radiator. A cut tree will last longer if stood in a bucket of water or a stand with a reservoir. You should saw off about 2-3 inches from the base of the trunk to allow the tree to drink freely. I've got a small real tree outdoors, as you can see in the header.

Winter sun

A plant that comes into its own at this time of year is the Mahonia 'Winter Sun'. It is so named for its beautiful yellow flower spikes that rise above the long arching stems with their glossy-green, holly-like leaves through the cold winter months, bringing a ray of sunshine into the winter garden. Not only are the flowers bright and sunny, they are highly fragrant and similar in scent to Lily-of-the-Valley. This mid-sized, hardy evergreen shrub will grow to 4m x 2.5m height and spread and will bring a shady

corner of the garden to life all year round. Mine is planted behind the railway sleepers and is now about 3 metres tall. Tall mahonias that become bare at the base are easily restored by cutting back the stems to about 15cm (6in) from the ground in late winter to early spring.

Whilst most mahonias have sharp spikes on the leaves, you can also buy Mahonia Soft Caress which is the first mahonia of its kind with spine-free leaves, which means it can be planted near to paths or doorways without the fear of being pricked as you might with traditional Mahonia varieties that have holly-like leaves. If you brush past these, there will be no worries about any scratches, opening up many new planting positions and ideas where you may not have considered Mahonia in the past. 'Soft Caress' is also compact and dwarf in nature.

Jobs at Driftwood

I doubt I'll be doing too much in the garden this month, the temperatures have really begun to drop and it's not much fun being out there when it's really cold. I have checked the many large containers of shrubs, that don't like the wind and the cold, under cover in an alley to the side of the house. I've got about several sheltered in there at the moment but they do need to be watered every so often, which has now been done. Regular visits up to the heated greenhouse are needed too, as the plants also need checking. I have one of those probes that you can pierce the soil with and it will tell you how damp it is, allowing you to tell whether it needs watering, it is a really useful

tool at this time of year! Maybe get friends or family to buy you one for Christmas! I regularly check my collection of tender plants too, removing the dead leaves removed and watering where necessary.

Make your own wreath

If you feel inspired, why not raid your garden for some greenery and colour to make your own festive wreath. Buy a moss ring in a local florist and give it a go. I've got both plentiful supplies of holly and ivy growing in the garden as you may have too. Keep some of the lower branches of your Christmas Tree to start the wreath off. You'll need some pieces of wire and if your holly has no berries you can cheat by buying some red berries on wire to add to the finished wreath. Start off by wiring each piece of greenery you plan to use, holly, ivy and tree branches. Next up work your way around the moss circle, carefully securing each piece with the wire to the moss circle by winding the wire around the frame, until it is covered with a mixture of the greenery. Finish off by adding a wire hook if you plan to hang on the door!

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

Geoff is a multi-award-winning garden owner, garden writer & broadcaster. Driftwood has appeared on BBC2 Gardeners' World and was a finalist in Gardeners' World Magazine Best Small Space. See the amazing 5-star reviews on TripAdvisor. Read all about Geoff's work for the community, appointment as a Coronation Champion and trips to Buckingham Palace including 2 Royal Garden Parties, in 2018 and 2023. Read the many published features on the garden in national, local and worldwide media, including TV.