



Coronilla glauca

In the Potting Shed

Geoff Stonebanks talks winter gardens with a hint of Christmas and more than a nod to sustainability

Winter can be a quiet time in the garden as many plants are dormant. But, if your green fingers are itching and you're craving some time outdoors, there's still plenty to do during the winter months. There are also a variety of plants to enjoy at this time of year. However, as the temperatures now start to drop, some preparation outdoors is key to protect your tender plants.

Preparing for the cold

If you have dahlias, cannas and bananas they need to be carefully protected. You can move them

to a sheltered place or cover them with fleece, hessian or straw. Keeping the roots dry will also significantly improve these plants' chances of survival through winter.

Winter colour

In terms of planting, it is always nice to see some summer colour through the winter months. Two lovely, yellow flowering, plants in my garden certainly fit the bill.

One of these is a Mahonia x Media Winter Sun. It adds year-round structure and interest to a garden and will grow to an eventual height and spread of



Schlumbergera Red Christmas Cactus

4m, so it is best placed near to the back of the border as an excellent backdrop to your other plants. This bushy evergreen shrub produces slender upright stems packed with sweetly scented blooms in winter and early spring. The flowers are bright yellow and resemble tiny daffodils up close and their powerful perfume fills the air with a jasmine-like scent attracting early pollinators such as bumblebees who seek them out in the sunshine. Its foliage is wonderfully architectural and glossy deep-green spined leaves sit on top of the main stem in rosette formations. You can plant lower growing shrubs and flowers in front of this large Mahonia to fill out the space in front of the main trunk. It will grow well in a shady spot in well-drained fertile soil. Mine is positioned behind some upright railway sleepers.

The second is Coronilla Blauea. This winter-flowering evergreen shrub is a real stand out plant with its bright yellow, pea-like, lemon-scented blooms from December through to mid-spring. It is much hardier than its delicate appearance may suggest and will tolerate temperatures down to -10 C, although to flower well, it requires a sheltered, sunny spot. With a compact height of 90cm, this Coronilla is well suited to container growing or positioning at the front of a border. Alternatively, it may be trained against a wall, in which case a height of 180cm can be achieved. It really is quite a spectacular sight on Christmas Day, covered in bright yellow flowers! More importantly, it is easy to grow and prefers well-draining soil in a sunny position. I have this growing in both my beach garden and in the garden at the rear of the house too.



Camellia

Christmas cheer

Bringing a hint of Christmas to the garden is the pretty camellia Yuletide. It is known to many as the 'Christmas Camellia'. It blooms from November to February, thereby adding its scarlet colours to the season both in your garden and as cut stems for a vase inside your home. Its flowers cover its glossy, dark green foliage for up to four months and are further enhanced by a crown of golden stamen in the centre. Yuletide will mature to a height of 3 metres, with a spread of 2.5 metres and prefers to be planted in moist, well-drained soil of any kind, except chalk based, in a spot in full sun or partial shade. Mine is in a large container on a north facing wall and does very well each year.

A pretty festive plant to bring some Christmas cheer in the house is the ever-popular Christmas cactus or to give it its proper name, Schlumbergera Red Christmas Cactus. It is a striking, easy-care houseplant that brings vibrant colour. Known for its brilliant red, tubular blooms, this tropical cactus flowers around late autumn and into the winter making it perfect for Christmas. It has flat, segmented leafy stems which arch gracefully, creating a cascading effect that looks stunning in a decorative pot.

Unlike desert cacti, the Christmas Cactus thrives in bright, indirect light and prefers consistently moist (but not soggy) soil. With proper care, it can bloom reliably every year and live for decades, often passed down through generations as mine has. It enjoys moderate humidity and appreciates a cool rest period after flowering to encourage reblooming. This long-lived, pet-safe plant also purifies indoor air and adds a natural touch to your Christmas decor.

Looking forward to spring

Now is a good time to consider planting bulbs for colour in spring. Bare root trees and bushes can also be bought and planted between November and March but take care to ensure you don't plant when the soil is frozen.

There are those that say you should leave your perennials alone and not to be tempted at being too tidy. I have to confess this is something I do find difficult as I like my garden to be neat and tidy. However, leaving the dry leaves and stems on your herbaceous perennials will provide a place for many insects to overwinter. Dry seed heads can also be good for birds and small mammals, and they glow in the winter sun.

Talking of insects and wildlife

Sustainable gardening focuses on creating a garden ecosystem that minimises environmental impact and supports local wildlife. This involves practices like composting, using peat-free compost, conserving water and choosing plants suited to the local climate.

A healthy garden ecosystem needs insects, so why not make a simple bug hotel with wood and sticks? Fill the gaps with hollow plant stems and pinecones to make a welcoming place for bugs to hide.

We can also help slow and reverse the declines in bees, butterflies, moths, hoverflies and other pollinators by growing a wide variety of plants including a mixture of native, near-native and exotic plants to support pollinator diversity.

Planning for water conservation

Water conservation is a hot topic and we've all been asked to consider harvesting rainwater through the use of water butts or grey water from cooking or cleaning.

One relatively easy way to conserve water is to consider the use of drought tolerant plants in your garden and design your garden with features that retain moisture, like gravel gardens. Try and opt for plants that naturally thrive in your area's climate and soil conditions.

Drought-tolerant plants, usually native to dry regions such as the Mediterranean, have evolved to thrive in dry soils with little rainfall. With climate



change and extreme weather events such as drought increasingly likely in the UK, growing drought-resistant plants means you can still have an attractive garden during a hosepipe ban.

Drought-resistant plants are also useful for growing in a sunny border with free-draining soil and work well in low-maintenance planting schemes. They can save you time, too, for example, you can avoid a lot of back-breaking watering by using drought-resistant plants in container displays.

5 drought tolerant plants I love to grow in my garden are listed below:

Sedum Hylotelphium Herbsfreude bears succulent, light green leaves and contrasting salmon-pink summer flowers, which mature to orange-red in autumn. Like most sedums it's a valuable late source of nectar for pollinators, particularly butterflies. For best results grow in well-drained soil in a sheltered spot in full sun. You can leave the seed heads standing over winter to provide architectural interest and then cut these back in February and March.

Another very pretty sedum in my garden is, **Sedum Atlantis**, it was The Chelsea Plant of The Year 2019, with the organisers saying that it's 'an attractive, easy to grow, versatile and multi-functional plant.' A native of south Korea, this variegated sedum is hardy in the UK, drought-tolerant, low-maintenance and very easy-to-grow so maybe the gardener's perfect plant! It provides perfect ground cover, or will fill in gaps between plants. The succulent leaves of Atlantis form a spreading mound of rosettes, reaching around half a metre or so wide. Their naturally creeping form makes them ideal for softening hard edges such as paths and walls, and they're perfect for growing in pots too. Its leaves initially emerge pure cream in colour, forming a wide cushion of striking serrated green leaves bordered in cream. These are followed by frothy yellow flowers from July to September. In autumn, the plants are flushed with another colour change as the leaves take on a subtle pink blush.

Lavender Munstead is a compact lavender, named after Gertrude Jekyll's garden at Munstead Wood. It bears dense spikes of fragrant, blue-purple flowers above aromatic, grey-green leaves. It's a popular lavender for gravel gardens, along with edging paths and borders, when you brush past it the aromas from its foliage are released.



Pony Tail grass, or Stipa tenuissima, is a lovely grass. It is a compact, evergreen ornamental grass and has upright clumps of airy silver green foliage, topped with feathery flower heads in summer and sways gently in the slightest breeze. In late summer, the plant turns a beautiful buff colour. It is an incredibly useful plant in the garden, as it combines well with pretty much all other plants, grasses, perennials and annuals. Dotted throughout a sunny border, it can unify a planting scheme. It's an excellent choice for a gravel garden, a naturalistic or prairie border, a coastal garden or a contemporary urban garden. It also works well as ground cover and grows very well in pots. It's very low maintenance, drought tolerant and is rarely affected by pests and diseases.

Catmint (Nepeta) is an attractive, hardy and easy-to-grow flowering perennial, renowned for its aromatic foliage which tends to attract cats, hence its name. Its aromatic leaves are green or grey-green and its stems are clothed from summer to autumn in small two-lipped mauve or blue flowers. Catmint is very attractive to bees and other beneficial pollinating insects too.

So, happy gardening through the winter months, the perfect time too, to start planning what to do in the garden in 2026.

By the Sussex Exclusive gardening feature writer, Geoff Stonebanks. You can find out more about Geoff and his garden at: [Geoff Stonebanks and Driftwood by Sea](#)