



Diverse December

In the final entry in our retrospective series on **Helen Dillon's** articles for *The Messenger*, we go back to December 2016. Helen highlights the opportunities of December, especially for leafmould, which was a staple of eighteenth-century gardening.

Something which never ceases to catch me unawares is how one season is miraculously transformed into another. From October on, I'm expecting winter and a mild and damp November, with fallen leaves helpfully tidying themselves into little corners. Then, around 10 December, I suddenly realise that winter is here.

This is an ideal time for gathering fallen leaves and putting them into big bags to rot down into lovely crumbly leafmould. I enjoy reading eighteenth century garden books: until the advent of peat, leafmould was an essential addition to potting compost – by the way oak and beech are considered the best leaves for leafmould.

Have you bought your tulip bulbs? As you know, they can still flower happily if planted as late as December. I'm especially keen on 'Ballerina' which is a beautiful orange with a sweet scent and one of the few tulips which come back year after year. Other favourites include pinky-orange 'Daydream'. It lights up the garden so beautifully on a dull day.

It is in winter that you realise how important structure is – of paths, the shape of the lawn, and how important good evergreens are – holly, yew and box. With regard to the latter, if box

blight comes my way, I'm not going to spend summer spraying and fussing over sickly plants, I shall make a new hedge out of *Ilex crenata* 'Dark Green' a little dwarf holly which is, in my opinion, the best substitute for box. Make absolutely certain that you buy the 'Dark Green' cultivar and not the species itself, *Ilex crenata*, which would be much too yellow.

It's not too early to cut away the dirty old leaves from your hellebores. If you notice any with the dreaded Hellebore Black Death – great patches of black on stems, flowers and leaves and a gloomy demeanour – it's off to the dustbin immediately with the whole plant. If you don't have this seriously nasty disease, grow your own hellebores from seed and don't introduce any new plants.

I'm just looking out of the window at a plant I love, *Chionochloa conspicua*. This gorgeous New Zealand grass has the ability to keep its graceful, arching 2m stems bedecked with seeds from summer right through winter until the following spring. The stems never cease to quiver and shimmer in the slightest wind. Give it full sun and a place of honour.

Autumn is the right time to get your climbing roses properly trained. The



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Betula albosinensis
Fascination

young stems, which are waving all over the place, should be tied down horizontally, whereupon they will produce a flower at each leaf joint – otherwise they just race up the wall and have one flower at the top.

Here, what's known as the gravel garden has proved a great success, especially in winter when the stark silhouettes of the leafless stems of the young trees (*Aralia elata*) and the large patch of sparkling silvery *Astelia chathamica* illuminate the most gloomy winter days. These are easily bought and interestingly break the usual rule of silver plants wanting full sun, and are happy in shade.

The deep orange satin bark of *Betula albosinensis* 'Fascination' in the front garden stands out much more in winter. Birch works perfectly with

spring bulbs, because their deciduous nature allows the bulbs to finish their life cycle before the leaves appear. We have nearly 50 'Fascination' and a couple of *Betula jacquemontii*. I can only have so many trees in the front garden because the house faces north, therefore they are not in any way interfering with the potential sunlight.

On a still day in the middle of December, with the low winter light, it is one of the most beautiful times of year, and the garden seems wonderfully peaceful after the autumn rush to get the place tidy. If you get a chance, buy a plant of *Daphne bholua*. Try Johnstown Garden Centre (just off the Naas road from Dublin). This plant has the most heavenly scent from midwinter on. Every front door deserves one. ♡