

"In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone"

Garden work is difficult in December and January but it is a very good time to tidy up by carrying out winter digging, cleaning tools and pots, tidying sheds and repairing fences. **Perennials** – Most perennials become dormant in winter but there are a few evergreen and winter-flowering perennials which will give colour during the darkest months of the year. The Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*) with its white blooms and the blue flowers of *Iris unguicularis* are attractive and good for cutting. Other plants that will bloom in winter are *bergenias* and the Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*). **Lawns** – Most damage to lawns in the winter is caused by wet rather than cold weather. Long periods of mild wet conditions starve the roots of air as they are trying to grow. To enable air to get to the roots you can spike your lawn with a garden fork or use a machine to scarify, then top dress your lawn with a mixture of sand and loam brushing it into the holes. This will improve drainage and encourage grass roots to branch. **Tubs and troughs** – Container-grown plants which are not fully hardy will need to be protected from frost. You can either move them to an unheated greenhouse, porch or conservatory or you can protect them outside by grouping your containers together and, if severe weather threatens, wrap them with bubble plastic, sacking or straw. Towards the end of winter you should clean paved paths, patios and decking. **Shrubs and trees** – Winter is pruning time for many shrubs and trees. Many variegated shrubs and trees tend to occasionally revert to being green all over and these green shoots of evergreens and deciduous shrubs need to be pruned out in winter. Plain yellow or white shoots often found in *euonymus* or hollies also need to be removed. Check all shrubs and trees during the dormant season and prune back any dead or damaged shoots.

Bulbs – Protect buried bulbs from mice and squirrels by laying panels of chicken wire across the ground. When your early bulbs such as snowdrops, scillas and muscari begin to flower you can clear away leaves and other debris from around them but avoid forking or hoeing the surface as this can cause damage.

Roses – These are now resting for the winter but you can continue to plant or move them. Plant only when the soil breaks up easily and is not frozen or waterlogged. Check recently planted roses after frost and, if it is very cold, cover young plants with straw. Inspect supports and ties, especially after high winds.

Climbers – Early winter is the time to prune ornamental vines. Prune winter flowering jasmine as soon as flowering is finished because next winter's flowers open on new shoots produced during the coming year. You can also prune deciduous climbers that will bloom on new wood such as trumpet vine (*Clematis*), summer jasmine (*Lonicera periclymenum*) and honeysuckle.

Digging – If the weather permits, now is a good time to dig over any ground. This is especially useful if you have clay soil as it gives the winter weather a chance to break the clods down before spring arrives. If you didn't dig in any manure in the autumn, it can be done now as long as the manure is well-rotted. If the manure is fresh, leave it stacked in bags to rot down over winter before digging it in.

Shredding – consider investing in a garden shredder to shred your woody prunings. Apart from being more environmentally friendly than burning or binning them, the shredded wood makes a perfect mulch for your flower beds, or you can add the results to the compost heap to help break down the green compost.

Trees and shrubs to enjoy in December or January
Christmas rose, crocus, mahonia,
pyracantha, *skimmia japonica*,
snowdrop, winter jasmine.

WINTER GARDEN