

In My Garden, November

*“No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feeling in any member –
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruit, no flowers, no leaves, no birds,
November!*

THOMAS HOOD

Thomas Hood is wrong in many respects, there is plenty of interest in November, we may have to look a little harder but a keen eye finds many pleasures.

Cotoneaster horizontalis is covered in minute scarlet apple-shaped fruits, scattered on its herring bone shaped twigs on fan-shaped branches amongst orange-red leaves. Pampas grass threw up its pale silvery plumes last month but it is not until now that they mature, glistening in the watery sunlight of late autumn. The snowberry, Symphoricarpus laevigatus, produced its squishy white berries last month too and they will remain until Christmas, becoming especially prominent now the leaves have fallen. These three common, easy to grow plants all give very good displays just as November slumps over into December when practically everything else has finished, and are well worth growing for that reason alone.

My Christmas cacti are all flowering well this month. I have about half a dozen different colours ranging from almost white to carmine to vivid orange pink. They spent the summer outside in a shady position and after being brought in at the beginning of October immediately started developing buds. Schlumbergera truncatus would naturally grow as an epiphyte on the branches of trees high up in tropical cloud forests, but on the window sill in my North Devon cottage they add a touch of the exotic and a welcome note of gaiety, cheering the often dull November days.

Medlars are one of the last orchard fruits to ripen in my garden. They appear pale russet-brown amongst the butter yellow and burnt orange foliage. Quite medieval-looking, their unbeautiful shape is strangely curious (the French call them cul de chien). They are not really ripe until bletted or almost rotten, and even then are still rather horrid. They do however make a delicious jelly, which is the perfect accompaniment to cold turkey leftovers or Cheshire cheese. In some years medlars persist on the tree right into December, and I have even used them as an unusual addition to a Christmas wreath.

One of the hardy plumbagos, Ceratostigma plumbaginiodes, just manages to squeeze out a few of its cobalt blue flowers before really hard frosts send it back downwards again till springtime. Growing in a rocky outcrop amongst deciduous Azaleas, it is only just hardy in my garden. Its roots go right down deep amongst the rocks and it sprouts up here and there among the nooks and crevices. Flowering with the plumbago is Persicaria vacciniifolium; it is a very late-flowering member of the knotweed family, with tiny leaves on delicate wiry stems. The flowers are on rat's tail spikes a couple of inches tall, pale pink when they first open ageing to an old rose.

One of the very last plants in flower is Ivy. It has two ways of growing; one immature trailing or climbing and another mature and shrubby from whence the umbels of flowers emerge like greenish-yellow dandelion clocks. They are a welcome source of nectar and sustenance to any late flying insects.

There are a few gorse bushes in my garden, one I planted and others that appeared as seedlings. I like gorse because, apart from its main flowering in April, it flowers sporadically throughout the rest of the year and often has another good flush in November too. In fact there is even a saying that “When gorse is out of bloom kissing is out of fashion”, well no need to worry, down in the valley it’s always in flower