

In My Garden

(Andrew the Gardener)

*"The frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind, The owl's cry
Came loud - and hark, again! Loud as before....."*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Usually at the beginning of January we will be anticipating the worst weather to come. However this year we've already had five weeks of sub-zero temperatures and 8 inches of snow from one of the coldest Decembers ever recorded. Down in the valley minus 10 on 22nd November and consecutively on Christmas night and Boxing Day night it plunged down to 15 below. Down here we are generally much better protected from the worst of the storms and gales but on still, clear nights the cold air settles and sinks downwards causing the temperature to drop at least 4 or 5 degrees colder than the rest of the village.

Today a steady cold rain made working Impossible so I prowled around the garden looking to see if any colour, cheer or interest could be found. The plants have emerged from their shroud of ice and snow rather battered and sodden like survivors of a shipwreck. The birds have stripped all the berries from my holly. I grow Ilex Aquifolium "Bacciflora" which has yellow berries instead of the usual red. The birds, believing the fruits haven't ripened, don't normally touch them until the spring, but this year the starving birds devoured them well before Christmas.

We all fed the birds down in the valley and regularly attract at least 4 varieties of tit, nuthatches and woodpeckers too as well as the more usual robins, blackbirds and finches. My neighbours recently had 22 blackbirds under their bird table at one time. An egret too, beautifully pure white as the snow visited our stream in front of the cottages.

Acer Griseum, the paperbark maple, makes an attractive small tree whatever the season, but its peeling cinnamon-coloured bark looks especially pleasing at this time of year. I planted my tree where the trunk catches the last rays of the sun as it sets, lighting up the thin wisps of bark.

There are a few flowers to be found; Cyclamen Coum is almost out. The buds are rolled up tight like umbrellas. They appeared last month and will be opened in a fortnight or so's time if the weather isn't too harsh. The colour varies from dark carmine to almost white, all with a dark purple spot at the base of each petal. I have a collection of these delightful little plants under a witch hazel amongst some double flowered snowdrops, which gives a vey pretty show from February into March.

Helleborus "Atrorubens" can begin to open as early as the end of November but in this particularly cold season it has chosen now to start. Totally oblivious to any amount of frost and snow the flowering stems prostrate themselves on the ground during really cold periods but soon stretch upward to the light once a thaw begins. This is an old hybrid with one parent being the later flowering "Lenten rose" Helleborus Orientalis. Its bright yellow anthers contrast well against plummy purple petals.

The best type of gardening to be done at this time of year is from an arm chair in front of the fire, poring over a seed catalogue, planning the year ahead and thinking of springtime.

The best thing about January is the back of it.