

## **In My Garden (and other places too) February**

*“Every gardener knows that under the cloak of winter lies a miracle . . . . . A seed waiting to sprout, a bulb opening to the light, a bud waiting to unfurl. And the anticipation nurtures our dream.”*

*Barbara Winkler*

I like to take a holiday in February, a tropical sojourn to recharge my batteries and sustain me like the fat in a camel's hump and water in its belly throughout the rest of the year's snow, hail, frost and rain, or whatever else nature inflicts upon us.

Few places can give me an actual spiritual experience, but Anthony Hunte's garden is one of them and I always make a pilgrimage there whenever I am visiting Barbados. Situated in a natural hollow, this bowl-shaped acre or so grows a lush tropical verdure Garden of Eden. Under mature palm trees every type of green, and shape and form of leaf, is accented by deliciously flamboyant tropical flowers in every vivid shade. Take a few steps and your vista changes and your mood differs as various

Seating areas each offer their own unique vignettes of this incredible lushness; follow a path and it ends with a sculpture or statue (all chosen with exquisite taste) like the full stop at the end of a sentence. In a shady corner a vast iron bowl brims with blue water lilies giving a sensation of cool reflection. As a scarlet Hibiscus flower yawns wide open the tiniest electric green humming bird is sipping its nectar while a golden yellow butterfly floats past so silently as if not to disturb the sublime ambience of this perfect symmetry. And what more could possibly enhance this earthly heaven – an ice cold rum cocktail and a delicate aria softly sung by an accomplished diva? Well they have that too! Could Paradise itself be any more divine . . . . . ?

Thoughts and ideas can manifest themselves in the most unexpected places. I have a group of birch trees, thirty all together, planted five years ago in a tight group 18 inches apart. I had wanted to quickly screen myself from a neighbour who had cut a gaping hole in some laurels, exposing my favourite “private sunbathing” area. I had always admired another group of these trees planted outside Tate Modern on the south bank of the Thames. Their striking white trunks and dainty light foliage is an effective scheme I wanted to emulate. My trees are between 12 and 15 feet tall now and I noticed recently that their juvenile pinkish-chestnut bark had begun peeling away to reveal the adult silveriness underneath. After trimming away all the lower branches up to a height of six feet and clearing away a lot of other fallen debris the whole area lost its neglected appearance becoming quite smart and tidy, albeit rather sparse at this time of year.

This morning (the 5<sup>th</sup>), whilst I was swimming in a warm turquoise sea with a balmy Caribbean breeze as the first few rays of sunshine peeped above the horizon, thoughts of the birches were running through my brain when the notion of under-planting the trees with snowdrops and daffodils came to me. It would make a perfect winter-to-spring feature and I already had several clumps of both that always came up blind because they so desperately need dividing and now would be the perfect time of year to do so. Miles away (and literally thousands) from my current environment, a school of fishes suddenly broke the surface in front of me and their pursuer, a leather-back turtle, poked its head above the water and I remembered where I was.

Back in Devon with things more mundane though no less beautiful, crocuses are flowering in the winter sun, opening wide as if to greet my return. Nearby

*Abeliophyllum distichum*, a shrub almost extinct in its native Korea, has started to bloom. The flowers are very light pink close up, but appear white from a distance like a tiny flurry of snowflakes. Never particularly floriferous, I believe it needs longer and hotter summers than we are usually blessed with, but never mind – a few flowers on a dreary February day, however small, are worth a thousand roses in June.