

In My Garden, February

"All these days, I may remark, are semi-dark, lightening a little about 3 p.m. before their final plunge into darkness; & yet I think even this darkness is the darkness of very early spring, not winter darkness anymore".

VIRGINIA WOOLF 28/1/15.

If you are lucky this month you'll receive red roses from your valentine. Until the end of the 18th century there were no red roses grown in Europe; no matter what artists painted or poets scribed, even that famous red rose of Lancaster is a rather effeminate cerise-pink. 'Slater's Crimson' was the first truly red rose introduced from China in 1789. Red roses owe their colour to this rose and owe two further important features too. The flowers from old European varieties open out very flat more often from rather ugly fat and dumpy buds. These China roses have a slight rolled quill to their petals, this allowed breeders to raise fuller flowers with beautifully high centred buds. They also flowered in wave after wave, flourishes of bloom throughout the summer like never before. In warm climates they are in flower constantly; enabling breeders to create new races of roses, the noisettes, bourbons and hybrid-perpetuals. 'Slater's Crimson' was thought extinct, it quickly went out of favour as bigger better scented hybrids became all the rage. In the 1950's plants were re-discovered growing on Bermuda and it is now grown by rosarians around the world. Bermuda is the home of many old and unusual rose varieties, it has one of the smallest and most exclusive rose societies. I have a collection of these historically important China roses, grown in pots against a sunny wall to prolong their season for as long as possible.

Artemisia arborescens, has various names but most commonly Lad's Love or Boy's Love, Old Man's Love, Southernwood or just plain Wormwood, the communal name for all the *Artemisias*. Historically it has been used medicinally for a great many different ills but traditionally to treat thread worm in children; all *Artemisias* contain powerful vermicides. Dried and made in to sachets it will also help protect your clothes from moth. Recently I saw this plant for sale re-branded as "The Cola Plant", with an invitation to smell and taste the foliage. The sage green thread-like leaves have a pungent antiseptic smell not quite as sweet as lavender or as wholly savoury as rosemary, carrying nicely on a hot summer's day. It has the same astringent herby taste as Absinthe. Neither characteristic is remotely cola like!

Lacking the hot dry climate which it adores, in my garden it rather sulks than tries to make the most of it, although it came untouched through minus 18 in the deadly winter of 2010. It takes the cold but pines for arid heat and sun.

Bullfinches are now becoming far more common. I've seen more in the last few years than ever before that. Mostly seed eaters I watch them feed on dried up old raspberries on canes that I haven't gotten around to cutting back yet. Always in pairs, the female is far much drabber than the vibrant cherry pink of the male, you

usually find two or three couples together. It is good to see their population increasing, something all too unusual in the avian world; though I watch them through narrowed eyes. In any old book especially about fruit growing you will read about bullfinches being a dreadful menace. They greedily strip young buds especially on plum and pear trees, ornamentals are not spared either, forsythia and spirea particularly susceptible too.

As our gardens slowly wake-up this is the month we make our resolutions for a good gardening year ahead.

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