



The Garden

We returned from our winter break in Lanzarote to summer temperatures - a striking contrast to last year when the garden was under a foot of snow and the 'Beast from the East' was raging up and down the land.

As soon as we go back, it was time for an orgy of seed sowing. The first are tomatoes, sown in modules in the greenhouse. This year we will be growing old varieties - Green Zebra, Black Cherry - and a couple of modern ones - Sungold and Romanesco. We'd love to grow more varieties, but our polytunnel is too small for more than fifteen plants and we like to grow at least three of each variety.

Garden gurus warn us against saving our own potatoes for seed. The ones we buy in the garden centres were grown in Scotland, where the colder weather avoids diseases. But we've saved our own potatoes every year and haven't had any problems. So if you want to give it a go, stick them in the ground and see what you get!

We grow 'Charlotte', planted on 13th March. We still get cold nights in spring, so we keep a roll of fleece handy and pull it over the shoots as they emerge. We also pile soil around and over the shoots. This gives them extra protection and prevents the potatoes turning green. The other is Maris Piper, from a sack bought last year which were already starting to sprout. These are 'maincrop' potatoes and are the preferred variety in fish and chip shops. They'll go on any time now until the middle of May, when they should be safe from frost.

During last summer's heatwave we found that the ground which had a thick mulch - 5 - 8cm/ 2-3 in - protected plants from drying out. If left until the ground had become baked, it could have prevented any rain that fell from reaching the plants. This year we'll do the same and get plenty on before the summer. Garden compost is ideal, but woodchips are a good alternative. We had a load of freshly chipped wood which we've been told must be stacked until it breaks down. But given the scorching weather, we decided to spread it anyway. It didn't do any harm and the plants survived. The mulch also reduced the weeds and in a few months had broken down to become a great soil-improver. So encore this year!

It's easy to forget that plants don't just sit in the soil - like us, they need feeding. So this month we'll feed our trees, shrubs and hedges with a balanced fertiliser - Growmore or the traditionalists' blood, fish and bone, sprinkling it over the root area before hoeing into the soil. This is very good for young, weak, damaged or heavily pruned plants.

We use the young foliage of the smoke bush (*Cotinus*) in flower arrangements, as well as enjoying the leaves glowing against the setting sun. The smoke bush is one of those plants which are routinely cut back hard to encourage the juvenile foliage - the other one we grow is a black leaved elder (*Sambucus nigra*), another shrub we'll cut back this month. We sometimes leave a couple of branches unpruned so that we don't lose all the height gained last year.

We'll delay pruning spring-flowering shrubs such as Forsythia and *Chaenomeles* until they've finished flowering. Gardeners are sometimes over-keen to get on with the spring tidy-up; a few years ago we lost all that our display by pruning too early. But it's OK to cut out any frost-damaged shoots from evergreens affected by cold weather which will never recover. We'll do the same with the annual pruning of roses before cutting out some of the older stems, along with any shoots that are crowding their neighbours. The aim is to get an open, bowl-shaped bush that lets the air and light get in. If you can, tie the shoots horizontally; which makes the plant produce more flowers. If in doubt, cut your rose down hard - you won't kill it and you'll have nice new shoots coming right up from the base. But drastic pruning gives the plant a nasty shock, so when you've finished, give it a good dose of fertilizer and a thick mulch.

Have you noticed that some of your variegated evergreens are turning green? It's reversion and happens because all plants with variegated leaves come from accidental 'sports' which growers propagate for us because we like them. But the plants are always trying to get back to how they should be - plain green leaves. So cut out all the green shoots, otherwise in a year or two the whole plant will turn green.

We've done so well with our hardy Geraniums that we'll buy some more this year to fill in any gaps. One of the best and most long flowering is *Geranium Rozanne*. Now is a good time to get them in, as well as *Astrantia* and oriental poppies.

Now for some more April jobs.

Twining climbers (such as honeysuckle and clematis) need regular tying in and twining around their supports.

Hardy annuals can be sown in pots or modules to provide colour in the garden, and half-hardy summer bedding plants such as marigolds (*Tagetes*), *Lobelia*, and *Petunia*.

Sweet peas can be sown outside this month.

Winter-stemmed shrubs such as Salix and Cornus can still be cut back at the beginning of the month. Prune back hard all the previous year's growth to within 1-2cm (0.5-0.75in) of the framework.

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