

In My Garden, December and January

Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand and for a talk beside the fire: It is the time for home

Edith Sitwell

We live in a very special place. One ten minute walk through the village on a still, perfectly clear night, under the merest silver of moon, with the smells of a hundred log fires of oak and ash and beech all burning to warm our homes or cook our suppers, that would have been filling the cold winter air with their smoky scent for the last thousand years, feels magical. In the skies above blaze a million stars so incandescent they turn the heavens gray, and brighter than I have ever seen anywhere else in the world. Whether Christian, Pagan or non-believer in December we all celebrate the old year ending and a new year beginning. Around about the 21st the winter solstice means that daytime will start to draw out and lengthen once again, and if Christmas Day is bright and sunny I like to think that I can detect a slight difference in day-length already, but it is not really until well into January that it actually does make a discernable difference.

How many times in my 27 year gardening career have I worked outside in January wearing just a t-shirt? Almost never! This year could not have been more different from last. At the famous Abbey Gardens on the Isles of Scilly they have a tradition of counting how many plants are flowering on New Year's Day. I did the same in my garden this year, counting nineteen plants. Bearing in mind that this time last year my garden resembled arctic tundra,, this season is a complete contrast; Berberis, several types of primrose, Vibernum, brooms, roses, Hellebores, Brunnera, periwinkle and winter flowering honeysuckle are all either brave or foolish enough to open blooms at the turn of the year. Even the cerise flowers of Cyclamen coum are a good six weeks early and snowdrops, which respond to day length rather than temperature, were out before the old year had ended as well. Snowdrops will always start peeping out above the ground by the start of December, but remain like tight clusters of praying hands just above the soil surface. Then as we pass the longest night they almost visibly start growing, regardless of how cold it becomes. My Glastonbury Hawthorn is flowering too. In folklore the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury is the planted staff of Joseph of Aramathea, which grew and flowered on Christmas Day. In reality *Crateagus monogyna* "Biflora", a subspecies of the common Hawthorn, will sprout leaves and occasional flowers sporadically in mild spells during winter as well as the usual flowering in May. This year my tree succeeded in flowering for Christmas. Normally the weather is just too inclement and it fails.

On a walk in Halsdon woods on New Year's morning I saw an otter on the far side of the river bank near the King and Queen Trees. Further upstream bees busily flew in and out of their hole in the Bee Tree. Even with this unusually temperate weather something worthwhile must be enticing them out to make such midwinter industry profitable; some ivy plants are having an additional flush of flowers, or do they fly further afield to people's gardens? With these thoughts in my head I paid my respects to the Money Tree and continued my journey homeward.*

The weather can very easily change, but it is hard not to imagine that spring can only be just around the corner.