

In My Garden – December and January

*“.... The summer hath his joys
And winter his delights;
Though love and all his pleasures are but toys,
They shorten tedious nights”.*

Thomas Campion

No other season has quite the same feeling of “Here we go again, let’s brace ourselves” that winter has. All sorts of predictions made in the autumn as to how cold or mild the weather will be depending on the abundance or absence of berries, the behaviour of birds, even the length of a horse’s winter coat. We look toward springtime seldom wanting to welcome the present and little wonder with the weather being such an ordeal.

Backalong I opened up the dankest, dark corner of the garden and planted *Ruscus aculeatus*, the Butcher’s Broom. A distant cousin to lilies and asparagus the morbidly dark green leaves (actually flattened stems called cladodes) are arranged in sprays of flat prickles. Traditionally used for sweeping or as a Yuletide decoration, it has rather fallen out of fashion in recent times. They vary greatly in height, some growing almost 5ft. whilst others, like a form I have acquired from an ancient Sussex forest (though not taken by me I hasten to add), barely reach 10 inches. The olive green flowers are tiny, positioned singularly, central to the diamond-shaped leaves, with males and females on separate plants. Developing during the summer the fruits finally attain the dimensions of a small cherry, ripening to a glowing holly berry red. *ruscus* will tolerate deep shade in summer, but enjoys some sun in winter. An ideal situation for them is under deciduous trees, where the pale winter sunlight makes the berries glow even brighter. To me the plant has a distinctly mediaeval air about it.

Amongst the *Ruscus* grows *Sarcocca*, the Christmas Box. Glossy evergreen box-like leaves totally obscure the tiny wisps of white petals making up the insignificant flowers. The perfume is however both sweet and powerful. I grow *Sarcocca confusa*, which will grow about 3 feet tall and has black berries.

Three winter flowering *Viburnums* I rooted as cuttings in 2009 are now growing into good sized shrubs. They grew well during the recent wet summers and are now flowering abundantly. The dark pink buds open to shell pink little trumpet shaped flowers in small clusters with a deliciously nutty sweet fragrance. Given woodland conditions, protected by overhanging trees, the flowers stand the frost quite well but exposure to desiccating north or east winds quickly browns them. Growing best in cool leafy soils, they are moisture lovers and one of the first shrubs to show stress in times of drought. Another lovely winter cut flower, a small sprig of this *Viburnum* and some Christmas Box brought into the warm soon scents the entire room with a most delightful sillage.

Quite by default I seem to have mad myself a sort of winter garden, a happy accident. The west facing section of the garden has gradually evolved into an area where certain varieties of plant like to grow. Along with the above mentioned plants that like the same type of conditions gradually develops a theme; they cater for bark, berries, foliage and flowers over a five month period from November to March.

Just as twilight goes over into darkness Woodcock fly along the valley. These secretive birds roost in the day and feed during the evening and night off worms and small insects they find on open marshy ground. They have a remarkable ability of being able to carry their chicks from one site to another. Delicious too, roasted entire, one of the tastiest game birds.

The turn of the year is often a time for reflection as the fag end of 2012 is finally snuffed out; that year of almost constantly poor weather becomes the new optimistic start of 2013, so however dire the climate might be now the one great comfort is that spring is never far away, take heart.

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