

In My Garden, January

"Nature has undoubtedly mastered the art of winter gardening and even the most experienced gardener can learn from the unrestrained beauty around them."

Vincent A. Simeone

As I lay back in the bath, my skin becoming soft enough to pull the thorns out of my hands; very easily done with nail clippers. I have been training rambler roses. The pruning and cutting of these climbers can easily be done wearing gloves but tying-in the canes can only be done with the extra dexterity of naked hands. If you hold out your left hand side ways on (left handers do the opposite), hold down a piece of string on to the top of this hand using your thumb. Always use natural jute string, with three strand thickness, never nylon or cable ties. Wrap the string around your hand many times. Cut the piece of string on its final return to the thumb. Then, also at this point, cut right through all the whole bundle of string. You will be left with thirty or so 15cm long lengths of twine, the perfect length for tying in most plants. You can vary the length of each batch of pieces by opening or squashing together the fingers of your hand. It is a hack I learnt as a student in the rose garden at Wisley, many years ago, I've constantly used it almost every working day ever since. I always cross over both ends of the string behind each shoot before I tie-in anything, that way you have a little buffer between the stem and the surface of the wire or cane. By-the-way, roses don't have thorns, they have prickles. A thorn is a modified stem and usually is still a living part of the plant, just look at the younger branches of a blackthorn or a hawthorn tree. A prickle has evolved from hairs on the stem and they gradually dry out and harden as the shoot matures and ripens. The prickles are to help roses climb, or rather hook on to other plants and heave themselves up higher and enjoy more sun. They offer very little protection from browsing animals, anyone who has ever had deer in their garden will know that roses are the first plants they'll strip bare of any new shoots. One of the roses I was tying-up was a member of a group known as the "mauve ramblers", *Rosa multiflora* hybrids that were mostly raised in the first part of the last century. The colour of the flowers ranges from mauve to almost indigo, at times they can show the truest tints of blue as any rose flower. Dark purple and violet 'Bleu Magenta' thornily embraces the shell pink 'Debutante', an inspiration from the National Trust's garden, Mottisfont, in Somerset. Please consider 'Debutante' instead of 'Dorothy Perkins', it has flowers scented like primroses and are presented in a far more elegant way than the brash blousiness of Perkins. Another combination I find most satisfactory is 'Aschermittwoch', ('Ash Wednesday'), a hybrid between a wild sweet briar rose and a deep pink hybrid-tea. It is not everyone's favourite as the flowers are a pale greyish pink, described by some as like "poorly nourished flesh". It's companion is called 'William Lobb', not strictly a climber but it makes a rather lax bush that works well with some support. The flowers are deepest magenta-purple and lavishly scented. It is also a moss rose which means its stems

are covered in masses of hairs and fine prickles which when rubbed leave behind the most delicious resin scent on your fingers. The two flowers, dark and pale compliment each other, highlighting the contrasts of both the different colours.

Outside the warm secureness of my bathroom it is bitterly cold, the rain lashes and the wind howls. To most rose growers scratches and prickles are not an issue, all we see are the flowers to come in summer time. I feed the birds with leftover Christmas biscuits, at the windows my cats stare owlshly out.

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