



## JANUARY IN THE GARDEN

By **Russell Jordan**



**A**lthough the winter months are generally considered to be rather dull and drab, compared to the rest of the year, in reality gardens still have plenty to offer. There have always been gardens large enough to be able to dedicate certain areas to winter interest plantings; bright white bark on birch trees such as *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii* or *Betula utilis* 'Grayswood Ghost'; the numerous bright stem colours of the various *Cornus* (Dogwood) cultivars and species; vibrant young growth, encouraged by annual pollarding, of a huge range of ornamental *Salix* (Willow)—these are just the first that spring to mind. The newly extended and reinvigorated winter garden at 'RHS Rosemoor' is worth a visit to get inspiration for your own garden.

The much greater use and availability of ornamental grasses, for gardens of every size, has made a huge contribution to winter interest in many 'ordinary' gardens even if their winter form was not the original reason for planting them. In the 'old days' of herbaceous borders, which were mostly cut down to ground level in the autumn, a lot of winter interest was provided by the hard landscaping in a garden and by the 'bones' in the form of hedges, large trees and even topiary. Now that borders are likely to contain many plants, especially ornamental grasses, which are not cut down until late winter, or early spring, it is possible to have winter form, colour and structure without needing to dedicate whole areas to specific winter interest specimens.

Some of the most seductive images, of winter gardens, are those that feature hoar frost bejewelling bare twigs or on the plumes of a statuesque *Miscanthus*. The reality of this kind of dramatic winter effect is that the photographer was probably up before dawn in order to capture this most ephemeral

of images. Realistically there are, sadly, vanishingly few days of the year when you, the garden custodian, are likely to see this magical vision with your own eyes. It's very much a 'happy accident' of having the right plant, in the right place, at the right time, rather than anything that you can purposely contrive. It's a nice excuse, if you need one, that you are leaving your herbaceous border uncut due to how much you love to see it frosted!

I have some borders which I tidy and chop down in the autumn and others which I leave in the hope that I'll get breathtaking frosty effects. If they happen, they are magical, if they don't I've lost nothing and can soon get on and chop everything back before growth starts again in spring. Other factors will also effect the decision making process; the presence of spring flowering bulbs necessitates a certain amount of chopping back, before they come into flower, or else their contribution is diluted. Old foliage and stems can help to protect dormant plants from very cold weather but this should be weighed up against the detrimental effect of having soggy, decaying, matter lying around, harbouring garden pests such as slugs and snails.

A major asset to a garden at this time of year, in addition to bright winter stems or coloured tree bark, is that most precious of garden highlights; a sweetly perfumed bloom. *Hamamelis* (Witch hazels) come in many varieties and are the classic winter flowering large shrub or small tree. Their spidery flowers, on denuded stems, are not that showy but their scent is capable of stopping you in your tracks as it fills the air. Ideally this occurs on days when the winter sun is warm enough to promote the scent while the air is calm enough for the perfume to not dissipate too quickly. Not all *Hamamelis* are as strongly scented as

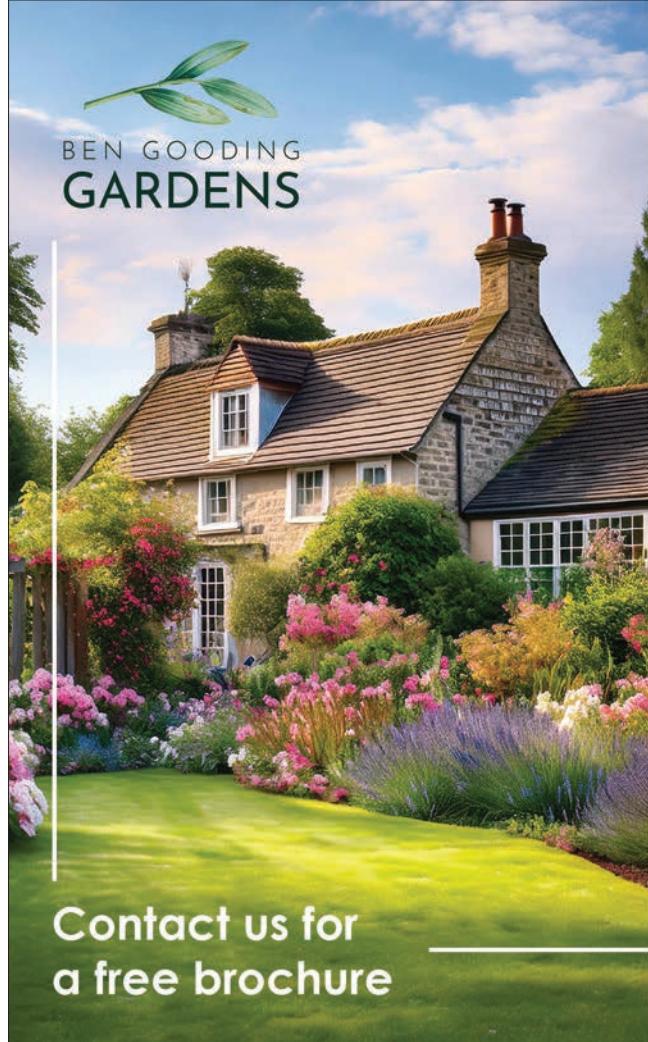
others and the unimproved species form, *Hamamelis mollis*, has some of the best scent although the variety 'Jelena' has more showy, orange, flowers (actually 'bracts'), whereas 'Arnold Promise' has been selected for its elongated bracts of pale yellow.

When you've had your fill of all the special winter sights and smells in your garden you might want to get on with some actual gardening tasks. Because it's likely to be pretty cold for most of January, it's good to concentrate on some of the more energetic jobs. Making whole new structures, such as compost bins out of pallets or leafmould bins out of fencing posts and chicken wire, are the kind of thing that you probably don't have time to do at any other time of year and these can be undertaken when conditions prevent you from getting on with 'proper' gardening tasks. The same is true for things like mower and power tool maintenance which are timely tasks for these early days of the New Year.

Now that most plants are fully dormant, deciduous trees and shrubs have lost their leaves, winter pruning jobs can be undertaken while it's easy to see what you are doing and while any cuts that you make will not 'bleed', which they might do if the plant was in active growth. For the same reason, rose pruning is best completed in the depths

of winter although I must admit that I tend to leave this until we have a period of dry and relatively warm weather, a rare combination at this time of year, because it's a task which requires a fair amount of standing around and getting cold.

The good thing about all those days when we get a lot of rain, during the winter, is that at least it is replenishing the groundwater and in turn our reservoirs. It's easy to forget that we've just had a relatively hot and dry 2025 and we need all the winter rain that we can get in order to reduce the likelihood of water shortages in 2026. It won't be long now until all those spring flowering bulbs, which you planted in the autumn, will be filling the garden with interest and colour. In the meantime the earliest of the bulbs to flower, snowdrops, should be popping up in gardens, hedgerows and verges where they are likely to have escaped from gardens sometime in the last five hundred years or so. Although they are now widely naturalised, they are not truly a native wildflower, their natural range is mainland Europe, and they were first thought to have been planted in UK gardens during the sixteenth century. Whatever their origin, they are such a pleasing sight, especially when encouraged to spread as a ground covering carpet, and a real harbinger of the new gardening year.



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