



FEBRUARY IN THE GARDEN

By **Russell Jordan**



As I'm writing this, outside the rain is lashing down and any thought of balmy, dry, days seems entirely fanciful. As I mentioned last month, we need the winter rain in order to fill up the man-made reservoirs and also to filter through into the natural water table so that the longed for 'hot summer' is not accompanied by water restrictions. 'New Year' already seems like a long time ago but, if you made a resolution to be more 'water wise' this year, then now is a good time to research and then purchase water butts, seep hoses, permeable membranes, and such like, while you have the luxury of time in this final month of winter.

In the garden it's essential to get on with all those tasks which rely on deciduous trees and shrubs being leafless and dormant; hedge cutting, tree surgery and planting bare-root plants being chief amongst these. It won't be long before our feathered friends are starting to scout out possible nesting sites so any major work, involving trees and hedges, needs to be completed pretty soon in order to ensure that potential nesting sites are left undisturbed. I often don't get around to planting bare-rooted material until this 'post-Christmas' lull. It seems to establish perfectly well as long as post planting watering is conducted during any dry spells, for at least the first year of establishment.

It's probably during February, when every day seems to herald a new snowdrop, early daffodil or precocious crocus into bloom, that gardening tasks begin to form an orderly queue. As well as completing winter tasks, ahead of full-on spring, there are also those 'getting a headstart' kind of jobs that can be started now in order to cross them off the list before things get really busy. If you didn't

get a really early start, by sowing them in November, then now is the time to sow sweet peas. They don't like root disturbance so it's a good idea to invest in some 'root trainers', the most commonly stocked product is made by 'Haxnicks', which are a sort of plastic tube affair which sit in a dedicated frame, to support them during the seedling stage, but which can be subsequently opened up to facilitate planting without damaging the roots. These can be reused year after year, to offset the fact that they are made of plastic, as long as you are reasonably careful when it comes to filling them with compost and when you split them open at planting time.

Nowadays it seems popular to sow hardy annuals in the autumn and to coax them through the winter in a frost-free greenhouse. This produces a slightly earlier display of flowers, than sowing them in the spring, but it does take up a lot of propagating space. It's probably a bit too early to sow 'half-hardy' annuals, unless you can provide supplementary heat and light, but sowing hardy annuals (such as pot marigolds, cosmos and nasturtiums) into multi-cell, 'plug', seed trays will at least get one spring task out of the way and they won't be sitting around quite as long as autumn sown specimens. While you are potting things up, it's worth checking anything that you've overwintered in the greenhouse to remove dead or diseased foliage and to start, very gently, watering if that tender perennial is beginning to show signs of growth.

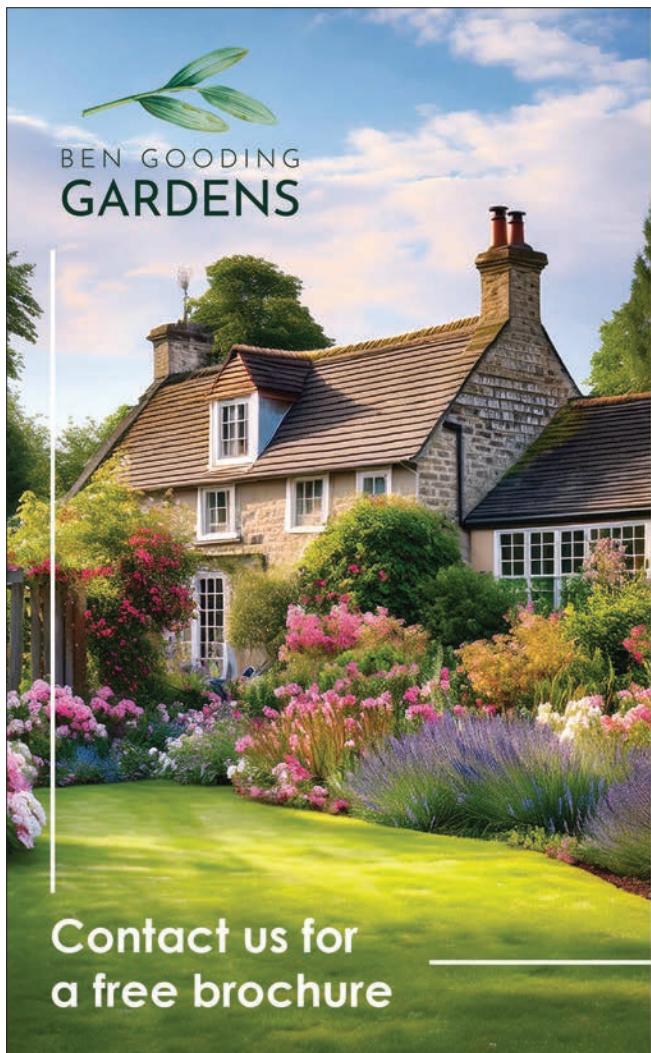
Despite the ravages of the dreaded lily beetle, I still can't imagine the summer garden without the scent of lilies and these can also be started off now, as soon as you can purchase them as bulbs from the garden centre, or have them delivered by

mail-order / internet suppliers. I don't think you can go far wrong with the classic *Lilium regale* and I tend to grow these as pot specimens, for the first year, when, like most bulbs purchased new, they are guaranteed to give a good show. Assuming I've kept them fed and watered, for their debutante season, and I've kept the lily beetles under control, then I usually 'retire' them to a spot in the border, they can withstand a certain amount of light shade, for future years in the hope that they will naturalise. While you are perusing catalogues for the 'Regal Lily' you may well be seduced by one of the other, myriad, lily varieties that are offered alongside them. It'd be churlish of me to suggest that you resist the charms of some of their showier stablemates; *Lilium 'Conca D'or* looks particularly enchanting!

Heading back outside, just for a moment, I should remind you that you really should be finishing your rose pruning exploits, if you have not already done so. They will be commencing growth soon so it's probably worth giving them a feed with rose fertiliser and mulching them with organic matter in readiness for the flowering season ahead. Actually, it's a good idea to get on with any mulching of borders that you've already cut down and also to start thinking about whether any herbaceous

perennial will require supplementary support (cut your pea-sticks now if you have access to suitable material). I tend not to cut down ornamental grasses, leave them for next month, as they are relatively late into growth compared to more traditional herbaceous perennials.

I'll end on that perennial 'do in February' stalwart; pruning wisteria. I don't know what percentage of gardens actually contain wisteria, but it always seems to get a special mention. It customarily gets a 'reduction of whippy growth' prune at the end of the summer and, most commonly suggested for February, a 'cut every flowering spur to just a couple of buds' in late winter. I find that in most gardens this kind of gets concertinaed (yes that is the correct spelling!) into a general 'cut back sometime while it is leafless' in a bid to reduce its urge to become a tangled mess. I think most people, fortunate enough to have an established wisteria, have settled into a maintenance regime that works for them and the structure upon which their particular beast is attached to. The more you are able to manually attach it to a structure, rather than just letting it twine around anything it fancies, the happier you will be to coexist with this most showy of climbing plants.



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