

Gardening tips for December

Just when you thought all the gardening was over and done for the winter, bumble bees and a few other nectar hungry insects decide to stay active during the winter months and hope that gardeners will do their best to provide winter interest, aka winter flowering plants to keep them going through to the spring when flowering dandelions make an unwelcome (or welcome depending on your love of dandelions) appearance.

So, what are the best or most valuable plants to winter wildlife and is there anything to avoid?

Garden centres are full of colour at this time of year but how do they do it, will the plants look any good by the time I've planted them and the weather has done its worst.

Firstly, a plant pet-hate, pansies or increasingly referred to as Violas. Fabulous flowering plants when first bought but keeping them looking at their best through the winter months is a challenge, they usually come good again in the spring just in time for digging them up and replacing with bedding plants. To keep them looking good one grower recommends bringing them into the house whenever the weather looks too wet, or too cold (a bit of a faff), perhaps something a bit more suitable for winter weather is called for!

If you want to go big and bold start with a Mahonia, they are covered in thousands of yellow flowers from November to March and will attract winter active insects such as bumble bees. Mahonias will easily grow to 5m in height and width if you let them. The good news is that you can prune hard after flowering and enjoy a more compact Mahonia the flowing year.

Next come the plants that are usually called "Winter flowering..."

Winter flowering honeysuckle, or *Lonicera fragrantissima* to give its proper name and if you want a heady perfume in your winter garden this is a good choice and the bumble bees love it too, and to keep it looking good, prune back to healthy looking buds after flowering.

Winter flowering Clematis, I have one called Wisley Cream which prefers to flower in spring which is a bit late for a winter flowering plant. Try a variety with "jingle bells" in its name, it sounds like it should be flowering by Christmas.

Winter Viburnum, good value plant for either foliage, flower, fragrance or berries, I have mine planted to hide the rubbish bins, good dense foliage and winter flowers. These do well in large pots where you can control the watering, they don't like being waterlogged.

Winter Jasmine, regarded as a climber but really needs a bit of help by tying into a plant support. Looks good against the house in the winter sunshine but remember to keep it watered. Actually, any pot plant next to the house should be checked regularly throughout the winter, water if drying out but not when frosty.

Christmas box (*Sarcococca confuse*), a good choice for a dense hedge, better than laurel. Usually identified by the very sweet scent of its tiny winter flowers.

Winter flowering heather, another bumble bee friendly addition with plenty of colour choice, good in pots as well as the border.

Winter aconite, a low growing bright yellow flowering buttercup type of flower, looks good planted with snowdrops in partial shade under trees.

Hellebores, an evergreen perennial always used to be referred to as the Christmas Rose, I've not heard that common name for a long time, perhaps because they are not roses or the term "Hellebore" is more recognised today. If you do choose one or more of the many varieties of Hellebore, think forwards to the EGRGA Spring Show and enter the category for Hellebore flowers.

Winter primula/primroses, excellent value, can even flower at intervals throughout the year and a good range of colours, garden centres should be full of them.

For membership details and to ask garden related questions please go to our website.

Merry Christmas and Keep gardening.

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