



THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence



I can't believe this is the beginning of my fifth year writing this piece for The Deux-Sèvres Monthly. Your amateur gardener has surprised herself, and what a lot she has learned during this time too – long may it continue.

Now, down to the nitty-gritty and jobs to do this month:

Now that apple and pear trees are dormant they can be pruned back to keep them in good shape and encourage fruiting. Before you start though, make sure the secateurs/loppers/pruning saw have all been sharpened – there's nothing worse than getting half way through a job then having to give up because the tools have failed.



TO DO LIST

Plant new trees, shrubs and hedging. During frosty spells when the soil is not workable you can safely store them in a frost-free shed with straw under and around the roots to protect them.

Apply nitrogenous fertilizer to trees and bushes grown in grassy areas.

Dig over the vegetable plot and other vacant areas so that the soil can be weathered by frosts.

Plant early potatoes in pots in the greenhouse or cold-frame for a really early crop.

Protect rhubarb crowns with straw, compost or leaf-mould, then cover each plant with a box or pot to encourage early growth.

If you have a heated greenhouse you can sow seeds of summer flowering bedding such as Salvias or Begonias ready for next year. They need to be at about 18c

Check stored dahlia and begonia tubers to make sure they are not rotting or drying out. If they are getting too dry, drop them in tepid water for a while, then dry off before storing again.

Continue to inspect stored fruit and veg, discarding suspect items to the compost bin.

Check lawn mowers and garden equipment and send for servicing/sharpening if necessary.

Check pergolas and other wooden structures, including stakes/ties, which are susceptible to damage by high winds or heavy snow.

On warmer, drier days start treating wooden furniture, fences etc with preservative.

Remember to buy some seeds and fat-balls for the birds; also to make sure their water bowls are not empty or frozen.

Start off by removing crossing, rubbing, dead, weak or diseased branches. The next step is to shorten last year's growth on each main branch by about one third. Cut at a bud facing in the right direction to keep a good shape – just as we do when pruning roses. For reference, fruit trees produce two types of buds – fruit buds and growth buds. Fruit buds are round and plump with a fluffy, downy surface, whilst growth buds are smaller, slender and pointed, to be found in a leaf axil.

You can leave some young side shoots which will develop fruit buds in the second year. Other side shoots which might be too crowded or crossing can be removed, as can those which are very long or growing towards the centre of the tree.

Lastly, keep a weather-eye on outdoor tubs. We all know that some tubs may be susceptible to frost damage, needing protection with bubble-wrap or similar, and of course tender plant foliage will need protection with fleece, but the soil can also freeze solid during harsh spells. This means the plant's roots cannot absorb moisture and the plant actually dies of drought if the soil is frozen for too long. Also, make sure tubs are raised slightly off the ground so that water can drain away to avoid water-logged roots. Conversely, if you have a tub beneath overhanging eaves, don't forget that rain will not reach it to keep the roots damp, so you will have to get the watering can out!

And now, I'll leave you to relax in the warm with your garden catalogues while you decide what plants and seeds to order.

Happy New Year everyone!

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