



February in the Garden

By **Russell Jordan**



In theory this is the last month of winter. This doesn't mean very much when February can bring some of the lowest temperatures of the year. I'm pleased that we have had some properly cold periods, even up to this point, because this means that some of the pests that might survive in a mild winter will have been killed off during this one. Many plants, and especially seeds of plants, require a period of cold before they break dormancy, starting back into growth when temperatures rise again, a process known as vernalisation. This is important because if we do have a mild spell, even in February, then plenty of weed seeds will germinate and get a head start on your ornamental plants which are yet to emerge.

Last month I touched upon using a sterile (weed and pest free) organic mulch to set off your spring flowering bulbs and early flowering perennials, especially 'Oriental Hellebores'. Mulching your beds and borders is another task which can continue, at a pace, this month before herbaceous perennials begin to emerge. Forking out any weed seedlings, or perennial weeds that have got established, is all part of this mulching process as is cutting back untidy remnants of last years herbaceous stems and decaying foliage. The time when borders were completely cleaned back, to bare earth, at the beginning of winter is long gone. If a herbaceous perennial is providing a structural element then it can be left right up until the point that you can see new growth emerging.

Something else which I wrote about last month, but which can continue this month, is pruning roses. Another pruning task, which the text books advise you to tackle this month, is cutting back all

the flowering shoots on wisteria to just a couple of buds. In theory, at the end of the summer, you will have shortened, to six buds or so, all the whippy extension growths but this will still leave plenty to tackle now. Fortunately, the lack of leaves makes it easier to see what's going on when pruning out all the congested shoots, dead limbs and the aforementioned shortening of the flowering stems.

Tear off, rather than cut, any suckering growth from the base as this will deter regrowth. If the wisteria is grown alongside another plant, a climbing rose for example, then it's even more important to remove all the unwanted growth because the twining nature of wisteria, along with its vigour, can easily swamp a companion plant or overload the structure which it is attached to. Checking the supporting structure, a system of strained wires attached to 'vine eyes' is the easiest to install, is important so that the wisteria, or any other climbing plant, does not peel itself off the wall or fence once its back into full growth.

Whenever the soil is not frozen or waterlogged there's still time to plant bare-root trees, shrubs and roses. The range available, from online and mail-order suppliers, is vast and it's particularly cost effective for plants which are best planted at a small size in large quantities—trees and hedging being chief amongst these. I have had great success, in the past, with herbaceous perennials bought in their 'bare-root' form. In practice, they generally arrive as clumps of rooted divisions, wrapped in damp newspaper or kept moist in plastic bags. These can then be potted up, into 9cm pots of compost, to allow them to put on some growth before planting out into their final positions.

If you are in the habit of growing sweet peas, I find that some years I am and some years I'm not, then now is the time to sow them. Some gardeners sow them in November and keep them alive all winter (under cover, of course, but protected from mice and voles) but I've tried this once and not found that the plants were any better than those sown in February. If you miss the boat completely then they are pretty easy to obtain as young plants by mail order, in garden centres and even D-I-Y superstores. While you are in the sowing mood, and assuming you have space in a greenhouse or on cool, indoor, windowsills, then there are some hardy perennials which are worth sowing and some, such as *Dianthus* (pinks), might even flower in their first year.

I tend to hold off sowing anything that requires additional heat, during these cold days, because they are more likely to succeed when the days are longer and average temperatures on the rise. Anything that isn't hardy will only sulk when forced to make an appearance during the relatively short, chilly, February days.

I've already mentioned 'Oriental Hellebores', flowering outdoors this month, as something which really benefits from being 'tidied up', the old leaves removed and a fresh mulch applied, to really show off

their exquisite blooms. In the same vein, but much daintier and much more fiddly to deal with, are the epimediums. The coarser, large leaved, varieties can provide useful ground-cover but the finer specimens are pretty feeble and easily swamped by neighbouring plants. These are best grown in dedicated beds, with little or no competition, and 'woodland floor' conditions. Denuding them just before their flowers emerge is well worth the effort or else the blooms will remain mostly hidden by last years foliage.

I have successfully combined the daintiest epimediums with a range of *Hepatica nobilis* seedlings, with flowers in shades of blue, pink and white, because they begin flowering in February and enjoy similar conditions. The one *caveat* that I have with growing hepaticas is that they seem to be a favourite when it comes to being totally nibbled off by voles or mice. The same vermin are also responsible for eating tightly furled hellebore flower spikes, especially when they are hidden under fallen leaves or anything else which protects the little pests from being spotted.

At least this month there are so many spring bulbs coming into flower, not to mention early flowering shrubs such as witch hazels, camellias and daphnes, that a little bit of rodent damage can be tolerated in the greater scheme of things.

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