

GATHER · AUTUMN

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GRACE ALEXANDER · FLOWERS

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SEASONAL JOURNAL

GATHER · AUTUMN

Through Gather, I publish growing guides for our favourite flowers as well as digital, seasonal journals, capturing the changing seasons in flowers, landscapes, food and forms. If you would like to see the other Gather digital books, please go to the Gather Library.

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Contents

/ p. 05 :
PREFACE

A love letter to the season of my soul

/ p. 07 :
AUTUMN

The season of softening

/ p. 09 :
OCTOBER

The damp sweeps in

/ p. 12 :
01 SOWING SWEET PEAS

Everything I know

/ p. 22 :
DRESSING A TABLE WITH DALIAS

An easy win

/ p. 24 :
JOBS FOR OCTOBER

Seeds to sow & flowers to harvest

/ p. 28 :
NOVEMBER

A dark month, lit with sparks

/ p. 35 :
03 AUTUMN SPACIOUSNESS

Making room

/ p. 34 :
04 HOW TO DREAM A GARDEN

The why & the what

/ p. 40 :
05 AN AUTUMN WREATH

The wheel of the year turns

/ p. 43 :
JOBS FOR NOVEMBER

Bulbs & compost

/ p. 48 :
03 TULIPS

Tips & tricks

PREFACE

I am a red head.

I am never happier than when I am wearing tweed, or stewing quinces, or wondering whether it is too soon to put a scarf on.

I love looking back at the summer that has been, and thinking idly about lighting the fire. I adore the abundance of the dying season, the last armfuls of flowers and the bottles of blooms along the long table, hot chocolate and the chilly, late nights in the orchard.

I come alive at the very moment you can smell in the air that autumn has arrived.

Gather · Autumn.

This is my love letter to the season of my soul.



Autumn

The tones in the light and in the flowers warm and soothe at this time of year. The grasses are no longer sharp, acid green blades, but soft, textural seed-heads. There is a sprig of bronze fennel on the table. Drying honesty, hung in swags in the kitchen. A late rose in a bud vase by the bed. The sound of hay wagons in the fields.

Our own harvests too, on a smaller scale. Flowers, of course, by the armful, even now. But also fruit and vegetables, and the first seeds.

A flood of poppy seeds flowing from the drumstick heads. Sweet pea pods twisting and popping. Picking the velcro-hooked wild carrot sticky burrs off a jumper and the dogs.

This journal guides you through the highlights of this golden time. Everything you need to know about sowing sweet peas to get the most opulent and the most abundant blooms next summer. How to guarantee floral abundance and joy next year by collecting the generous seeds your flowers give you now, and sowing those hardy ones for getting a jump start on the next season.

There are rich, bruised images reflecting the depth of the colours at this turning of the year. Words for warmth and celebration. For hibernation and for rebirth.



October

The damp sweeps in

In September, there are moments you can forget that it is not still summer. Where there are days of sunshine and where the air holds a little residual warmth.

October allows no such luxuries. The sky is heavy and the sunrises are slow. It is hardly worth putting the boots away between walks.

But there are wonderful shifts too. Evenings lit by the fire and days warmed by roasted squash and hearty soups. The kitchen table heavy with the very last of the dahlias, sprouting sweet peas, and turning beech leaves.

MONDAY
4 OCTOBER

-

I clear more kitchen garden beds and dib out yet more leeks. They germinated better than expected and I have hundreds.

In amongst the vegetables are the seeds heads of the flowers that that spent the summer as companion plants. There are marigolds (which I scatter) and nasturtiums (which I collect). There suddenly seems to be borage everywhere.

TUESDAY
5 OCTOBER

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A walk up to Netherclay. The path is scattered with conkers. The girls dodge in and out of the standing maize, themselves conker-coloured blurs in a muted gold landscape.

SATURDAY
9 OCTOBER

-

The star of the flowers right now are my asters. My mother was always trying to persuade me to go to Colwall when she lived in Malvern, a short hop over the tallest hill between her cottage and the National Collection of Michaelmas daisies at Picton Court. I was never mad keen, not my colours, not really my shape. And yet the clusters of *Symphotrichum lateriflorum* 'Lady in Black' (it was an aster when I planted them, they have all inexplicably changed their name) bring me so much joy. Not just me, they are absolutely buzzing with bees. Which is slightly problematic because they have flopped all over the path and getting past feels like taking my life in my hands somewhat. But in the unseasonably warm, golden October sunshine, it is gloriously soothing.



01

SOWING SWEET PEAS

Sweet peas are one of those magical flowers. The scent alone merits their inclusion in any garden, whatever size or inclination, and the fact that you can sow them on the darkest days makes them all the more special. If you are already dreading the winter and dreaming of spring, then sowing sweet peas will gift you a lift and hope. A few hours with your hands in soil is likely to be just the thing.

What to sow:

I grew sweet peas for years before I worked out the differences between all the different sorts. I just chose and grew the colours I liked. If I am honest, I still do.

However, if you are particularly fussed about growing a particular shape or you want them at a particular time, then I suggest a little research into the different sorts is merited. There are Spencers, grandifloras, and the early flowering ones. If you just want buckets and buckets of colour, just pick ones that you like.

When to sow:

Like so many of the best flowers, little and often is my advice. The flowering season of each plant can be stretched a bit with diligent picking and the odd decent feed, but generally, I would suggest some good old successional sowing. My sowing schedule goes something like this.

THE FIRST SOW. Now. October. The fire being lit for the first time is a good sign that the nights are cold, and the house is warm. The sown seed goes in a warm place but as soon as they are up and sprouting, they go outside to a cold greenhouse or a cold frame. Remember this last bit; it is absolutely the key to having strong plants that last through winter and burst into growth in the spring. Make a note.

THE FESTIVE SOW. By the time the in-laws have left, I require a little solitude and solace. I am also unlikely to be using the cooker for a few days as the fridge is full of leftovers and I have already eaten my

bodyweight in sprouts and bread sauce. The lid of the Everhot is therefore available for providing the sweet peas with a little bottom heat. (Everhots are much cooler than Aga's and give off a much gentler heat. A little bottom heat is a good thing, but don't cook the poor things.) As above, as soon as they are up, out they go.

THE FEBRUARY ONE, OR THE ONE THAT I GENERALLY FORGET.

This one is more a nice to have than an essential, and the chances are the previous sowings are already looking strong and healthy and I am already worrying that I am going to run out of space in the greenhouse. However, it is good to plan for this one because of mice. There is little that can go wrong with germinating and growing sweet peas (they are terribly straightforward in the main) but the one thing that can catch you out is mice. I used to think that, once the seeds had germinated and the goodness gone from the seed into the shooting growth, the mice would lose interest. However, I don't know if they were especially hungry last year, but I saw enough horror stories of ravaged seedlings to not be so confident in the future. If you have suffered sad losses from the previous two sowings, February is a good time to regroup and try again.

THE LAST GASP. I frequently have sweet peas going into September. Partly because I grow a lot of sweet pea plants, and partly

because I cannot resist a May sowing. I have got all my annuals done and my seed sowing fingers are itching. One last throw of the sweet pea dice. Just a few. Just because they look extra special amongst mists and heavy dews. Oh ok, I just do it to show off really.

You may have noticed that, even in the most fecund stage of spring, I never suggested direct sowing. You are, in my experience, simply feeding mice very expensive food if you do that. I always start mine indoors and keep them protected with wire mesh for as long as I can.

Starting sweet pea seed

You will need:

- Peat-free compost. Not the seed compost, a good multi-purpose.
- Cardboard inners or, if you are going to reuse, good quality plastic root trainers.
- A container to hold the inners, one of those plastic trays that mushrooms come in is perfect
- Labels
- Seed

There is also a bit of a debate about pre-soaking seeds before sowing and, like so many of these gardening dichotomies, it inspires strong feelings in some. Not in me, I hold a pragmatic view. If the seed is over a year old and looks a bit wrinkled, soak it. If



they are plump and look smooth and round, they probably don't need it. The initial watering will suffice.

Fill your pots with good quality compost. Sweet peas produce tap roots, so they do need a bit of depth underneath them. This is why cardboard tubes or root trainers are better than small pots, but the deeper 9cm pots can be used if that is what you have. You will probably find out sooner or later so I may as well tell you, it is remarkably fiddly to fill tubes and compost does tend to go everywhere. You can either put the tubes in the container and try and fill them in situ (this does mean you get a lot of compost in between but that's not a bad thing, the roots are likely to come through the cardboard before you come to plant them out) or put the tube into the bag of compost and fill it there, keeping a hand over one end.

I always used to say sow two seeds per tube because most sweet peas germinate at around 65%. However, my seed has proven to be so good, I think I am going to say one seed for each tube. Sweet peas do like space and I am never going to thin out a perfectly healthy sweet pea seedling. I am just not that person.

It is important to make sure the seed is not buried too deep. You are aiming for about a centimetre. I find dibbing with a pencil and dropping the seed in is incredible satisfying, but it is hard to keep track of the depth

and everything sinks again when you water. Filling with compost to very nearly the top and then adding the seed and covering is safer in terms of knowing how deep they are, but also doesn't compact the compost.

L A B E L .

Label each of the tubes unless every single tube in the container is the same variety. I know, I have tried to get around this will saying that 'from this row is Jilly', or 'this is half Nimbus and half Burnished Bronze'. I promise you that when spring arrives, all this means is that you have a lot of identical, unidentifiable plants.

W A T E R O N C E .

Water very gently but very, very thoroughly. When I say gently, the water will bounce out of the container and splash everywhere, particularly when the compost is dry. Do it in a sink or outside.

I haven't found a way of doing this without water spurting off in strange directions so I just accept that it will and take precautions. The first water should be a comprehensive one as it takes the place of the soaking step that we have missed out (if you have) and there needs to be enough moisture in the compost to soften the seed coating.

It bears repeating; the mantra to remember for most seeds, but particularly sweet peas, is warm and dark for germination, cool and



light for growing on. Around 15 degrees Celsius is about right according to the experts but I think a kitchen windowsill, or any place out of a draft indoors, is fine. Keep them moist but not wet.

LEGGY IS NOT A GOOD THING.

Once the shoots are up and through, get them out in the cold. If you molly coddle them, you get weak, leggy plants. A cold greenhouse, a cold frame, or just in a sheltered spot with some protection from mice, will keep them happy.

Once the plants are 4–6 inches tall, pinch out the central growing tip, just above a leaf joint, leaving just two or three leaf nodes. This will encourage the plant to branch vigorously from the base. If they are growing really well, it might be worth putting the individual tubes into a pot.

Next steps

Hopefully, your sweet peas have made it through the winter, and they are starting to put on a bit of growth in the spring. You will probably have realised that you have grown far too many and now you need to decide where to put them. There are generally two questions at this stage. Ground or pot? How are you going to support them?

PLANTING OUT

Sweet peas are surprisingly hardy so, although the advice is generally to wait until the last frost, it doesn't matter if you time this a bit wrong. Sweet peas won't die if you plant them out too early. What they will do is sulk.

This is clearly my own projection; what they are actually doing is prioritising root growth over leaf growth but every year it catches me out. I plant out what I think are strong healthy plants, and they just sit there. Sometimes, this is because they have been planted over a mole tunnel and they hate this, but generally they are fine and I am fretting unduly.

Plant seedlings out after the last frost, roughly 8 inches apart, against a support, trellis or netting. Tie them in to get them started.

If you want tall plants and long stems, planting out your sweet peas on good, rich soil and making sure they are sheltered from the wind will make all the difference.

GROWING ON.

Sweet peas are heavy feeders and require a little extra pampering to produce abundantly. Prepare planting beds with a thick layer of compost or well rotted manure

and a generous dose of natural fertilizer or fermented plant juice.

They grow rapidly and require a strong structure to climb. Hazel teepees are perfect.

Sweet peas love water, and without consistent moisture they will fail to thrive. Keeping their thirst quenched during warm weather is crucial. Feed plants weekly with diluted seaweed emulsion.

COURTYARDS & CONTAINERS.

Growing sweet peas in pots absolutely can be done. Every year, I make a point of having a pot in the back courtyard with just Piggy Sue in it just I can sit next to it when I eat my breakfast and I can look out on it when I am doing the washing up. However, the pot is big.

All peas have long tap roots, and all peas are hungry plants, so I wince when I see five sweet pea plants crushed into one small pot, usually accompanied by shiny bamboo canes that the tendrils keep slipping down. You might get the odd flower from them, but they will never live a happy life. My pot is an old metal wash tub from the tip shop and it is at least a metre tall. This is no time for terracotta.

Fill it with best peat-free compost you can get your hands on and be prepared to feed.



SATURDAY
16 OCTOBER

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There is still colour in the field. Not just dahlias and the odd deep warm yellow hopi sunflowers, but phlox, Erigeron and honeysuckle. My mother's garden is even more sheltered than mine and she has cosmos and roses, as well as curtains of deep red Virginia creeper. I am feeding her cat for her this weekend and I make the most of the opportunity to have a good look round and a sneaky snip.

MONDAY
18 OCTOBER

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I wake to mist and murk. Thick, milky, soft mist, obscuring the hill and swirling around the trees in the orchard. The cobwebs between the dahlias are covered in droplets of water. The sun burns through as we watch.

TUESDAY
19 OCTOBER

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A day in the greenhouse. The clearing of old pots and the pricking out of new seedlings. After the failure of my outdoor beds of winter leaves (a rather lethal combination of sunbathing dogs and ravenous slugs) I am taking no chances. Pots on the staging in the greenhouse, inspected daily for signs of being nibbled.

SUNDAY
24 OCTOBER

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The great bean harvest today. The sun fed these beans and now these beans will feed me. These are Bridgwater, a local form of the borlotti, and every single one is as beautiful as a speckled egg. Six plants have given 817g of dried beans and take me the best part of the afternoon to pod. The same number of plants of bonne bouche give 630g. (Bonne bouche is a tall French bean, but I left it for podding.) I calculate that all of my harvest would have cost about £2.10 in Waitrose. I either have to upscale and become self-sufficient in pulses or devote the bean patch to a crop with a slightly more efficient turnover. More chard. I grow (and eat) a lot of chard.



02

DRESSING A TABLE WITH DAHLIAS

I don't want to come over all existential or anything, but there is something about the last gasp. The flowers of autumn are all the more precious because they are the lingering reminder of summer, and you know there will be no more until the tulips. Or maybe it is all just a coincidence and dahlias would be wonderful at any time of year.

And there is much to commend dahlias. They come in all my favourite colours; golds, rich reds, warm blushes. They are embarrassingly easy to grow. They flower their socks off for months. Compared to say, roses, they are positively low maintenance and abundant.

What they do have in common with roses is that they look wonderful on a supper table. At the end of a day, little bud vases of dahlias amongst platters of roasted pumpkin and roasted walnuts is, quite frankly, my idea of heaven. I always think Café au Lait was destined for candlelight. It just glows. Candlelight always flatters though, something that is worth remembering for those of us over forty.

What makes this a particularly relaxed sort of arrangement is that little bud vases or bottles make it easy to support heavy heads. Proper florists bemoan the popularity of dinnerplate dahlias because they are a bit of a nightmare to do anything with, what with the blooms being the size of your head and facing determinedly slightly downwards. A bud vase or a small bottle (make sure it has a heavy base otherwise the weight will tip it over) makes them a delight.

With flowers as with everything, variety is the spice of life. I used dinnerplates as focals and then dotted amongst them smaller ball dahlias, and the odd very open 'Karma Choc', which is almost but not quite a waterlily shape. I leave the buds on and I don't altogether mind that some of them are going over. I think they look all the more wonderful for that.

As Shane Connolly so memorably said, anyone can put a single dahlia bloom from the flower shop in a jam jar, it is adding the side stem and the bud that 'makes it Fabergé'.



Jobs for October:

Seeds to sow & flowers to harvest

Seeds to sow

The autumn has truly arrived, which can only mean one thing. We can start our sweet peas.

SWEET PEAS (*LATHYRUS ODORATUS*)

I hope you have been saving your loo roll inners for this moment. Fill with multi-purpose compost and put two sweet pea seeds about a centimetre beneath the surface. Water thoroughly once and leave in a warm place. As soon as the green tips are up, put them out into the cold, check for any slugs in the environs, and then leave until spring.

HARDY ANNUALS

If you are in a very mild climate, and the first frost is still some time away, you could start some more hardy annuals under glass.

SEEDS THAT NEED CHILLING

Stratification means the exposing of seed to cold to trigger germination. That is, some seeds need to know it has been winter before they sense spring. You can do this by sowing the seed in the ground before the cold sets in, put them in a seed tray outdoors, or cheat. Cheating just means putting the seeds in a ziplock bag with some moist compost and burying them in the freezer for a few weeks.

Works a treat for:

- / Aquilegia
- / Larkspur & delphiniums
- / Icelandic poppies
- / Clematis (worth trying from seed)
- / Thalictrum

Flowers to harvest

THE TRUE AUTUMNALS

- / The last dahlias
- / The very very last sweet peas
- / Japanese anemones
- / Achillea
- / Gaura
- / Hydrangeas for drying
- / Eryngium seed heads
- / Sanguisorba
- / The branches of turning foliage
- / Amelanchier leaves & berries
- / Crab apples
- / Rose hips
- / Grass seed heads
- / Foraged hedgerow fruit and foliage
- / Big beech branches in gold & mustard
- / Ferns & brackens

Other jobs for this month

/ WHAT NOT TO DO

Don't tidy up and don't cut down the skeletons of the flowers and plants. The seed heads will feed the birds and the fallen and decomposing foliage will give a place for wildlife as well as feeding the soil microbes. Channel your inner Piet Oudolf and leave it standing.

/ PLANT OUT PERENNIALS

If your soil is still warm enough then getting plants into the ground is absolutely worth it. I find early October to be a good time; they have just enough time to settle in before the big cold and then they will be ready to put on some amazing growth come spring.

/ SOW WINTER LEAVES UNDER GLASS

Just a few greens make all the difference in the world. Oriental leaves, microgreens and pea tops give a shot of green in the autumn months. I love pea tops. I always have a pot on the go on the kitchen windowsill.

/ TAKE HARDWOOD CUTTINGS

Shrubs can be expensive but indispensable in a cutting garden. Expand your stock by cutting into woody stems and putting into pots of mixed grit and compost. Try Viburnum, Physocarpus, Abelia & Philadelphus (mock orange).

/ COMPOST CARE

Keep adding to and turning your compost heap. Aim to have some ready for top-dressing your beds before the cold weather sets in.

/ WINTER CARE OF DAHLIAS

If you have dahlias and their foliage has been blackened by the frost, it is time to either lift or mulch. It is the damp that will get them as much as the cold, so if you have good drainage and a mild climate, mulch with compost or straw.

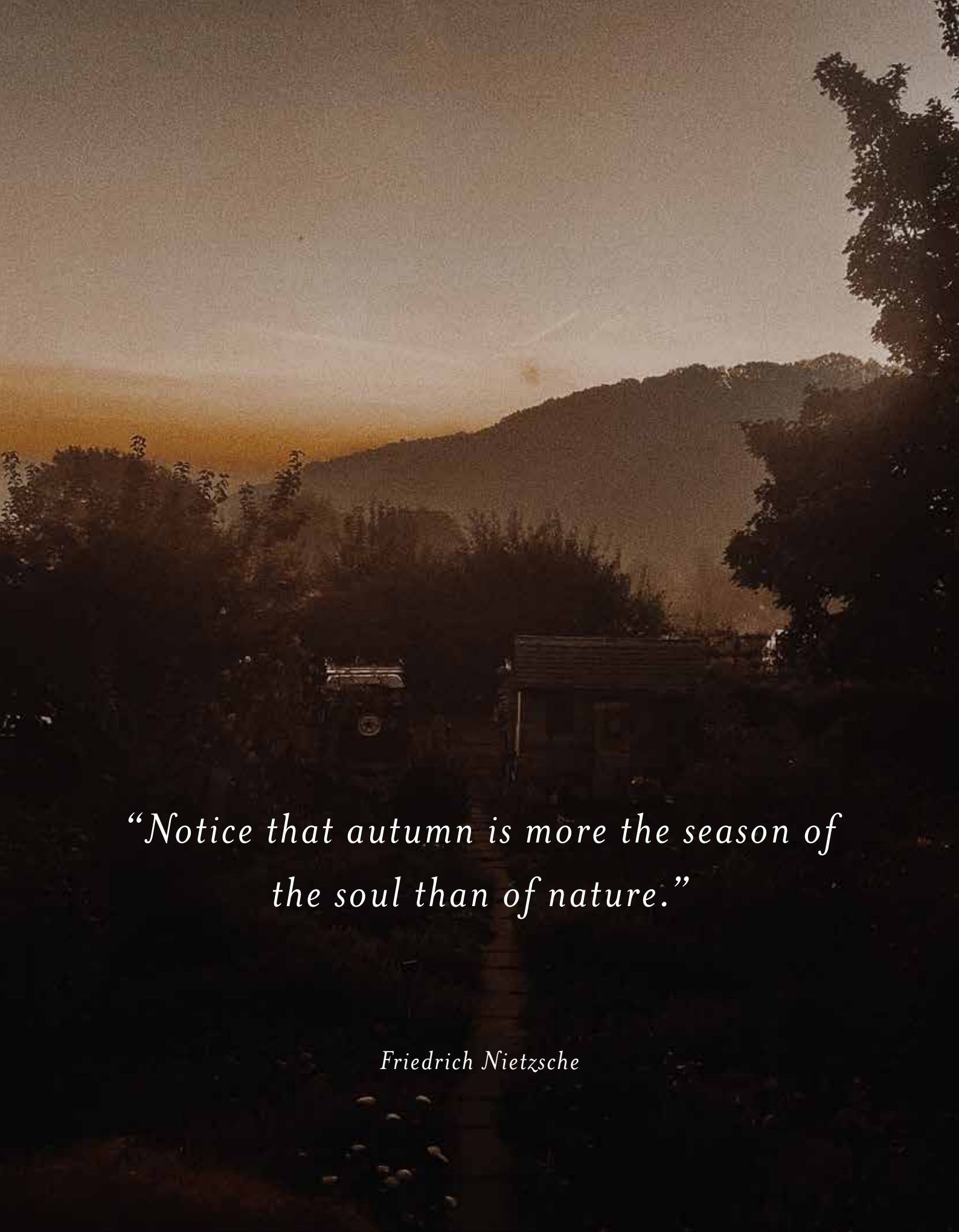
/ DIVIDE YOUR HERBACEOUS PERENNIALS

You can be surprisingly brutal with this although the chunks should be big enough to give flowers soon (think a minimum of a 9cm pot; if you wouldn't buy it in a garden centre then it's probably too small).

/ PLANT NARCISSI & ALLIUMS

Many bulbs for spring flowering will benefit from being planted whilst there is warmth in the soil. Leave tulips until December though, they need cold.

If you would like the October jobs as a standalone pdf for printing, just head over to the Gather·Library to download.

A photograph of a house at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey. The house is dark, with a path leading to it. There are trees and bushes in the foreground and background. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

*“Notice that autumn is more the season of
the soul than of nature.”*

Friedrich Nietzsche

November

A dark month, lit with sparks

November is a month for hibernation
and restoration.

It is the month for gently pottering
in the short days, and for piling
blankets on the bed for long nights.

November is the month for Sunday
roasts and hanging branches and boughs
above the table.



WEDNESDAY
3 NOVEMBER

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At this time of year, I take any excuse to drive the top road to Wellington. It is lined, for miles, with the tallest, most majestic of beech trees. I read something the other day about the key to inspiring awe is redundant space, especially above our heads. Gothic cathedrals and modern shopping centres know this only too well. Maybe this is why the high up apex of the flamingly golden beech trees meeting is the key to wonder. This is not the cosy, inviting tunnel of mists and country lanes. These trees inspire awe.

FRIDAY
5 NOVEMBER

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Every morning this week I have gone out first thing with my heart in my mouth to see if the dahlias have blackened. It feels cold enough to have been a frost and I have dug out all the jumpers and gloves, but the dahlias are still going. I adore the way some of their forms change at the very end of the season. The café au laits have twiddly, twirly centres and Spartacus has developed the most beautiful caramel streaks in amongst the brick red.

MONDAY
8 NOVEMBER

-

We walk to the soundtrack of clucking pheasants. The girls are on high alert, a spring in their step. We come over the little bridge and stumble across a deer. It outruns Morag quickly and we all watch as it hops effortlessly over the hedge into the wooded flank of Pickeridge Hill. The dusk is falling and the hoot of the Corfe owl echoes softly. There are leaves tumbling from the ash trees along the path and the moment is so perfect that I put my arms out to catch some.

It is at this point I realise I have dropped Hugo's lead and I have to do the whole walk again, backwards and with a torch.



03

AUTUMN SPACIOUSNESS

The clocks change in the night. Time shifts and we have woken this morning out of British Summer Time. Although winter, counter-intuitively, does not start until 21 December. We are firmly in the in between season. Early autumn has charm and novelty and a nip in the air. This bit of autumn is a little more dank. November is not a fun month.

The only solution in my mind is to take a note out of the Scandinavian book and to invest in comfort. But before I can fully indulge in the blankets and warmth that this horrendous weather requires, my mind has turned to another matter. Space.

No, not that sort of space, I am appalled by the billionaires colonising (and I use that word advisedly) the rest of the universe as if we could be trusted with anyone else's planet when we have destroyed our own. But the spaciousness of my home.

I can't pretend the two things aren't related though. The consumerism and capitalism that is at the core of what we need to change to slow this damage is represented in stuff.

My field has stuff, much of it plastic. All those pots and seed trays and detritus of a busy season. I keep the studio as plastic free as I can and I generally succeed, but the *paper*. And the cottage. Oof.

And so before I embrace rest and hibernation, there is one more task to do. Creating space. As much as can be reused will be, and I am sending my mother on charity shop drop offs on a weekly basis. The field is now ready for winter, and I strongly recommend asking round your local garden centres for pot recycling.

These last few years have felt hard. They have felt heavy. So much stuckness. I am ready to shed and to be freer.

What I am not doing, is being too tidy with the plants. What seed heads I have are being left standing. The leaves that are not being used to make leaf mould are being left where they are, although, Sue of Nant-y-Bedd suggests just putting leaves on the beds in autumn and letting the worms do the work. You see? It can be easy if you let it. Light touch. Nature will heal if we give it space.



04

HOW TO DREAM A GARDEN

Goodness me. What an entrance autumn has made. My cottage, cave-like at the best of times, is dark. The rain is hammering onto the kitchen garden and any autumn leaves that were far enough on the turn (mostly the cherries and the amelanchiers which had just taken on their most beautiful scarlet) are a sodden mess on the grass.

I've had to remember which of my wellies leak, and a tweed scarf has provided much needed fortitude in facing the evening dog walk in dusk.

So much for the rusts and bracken golds of the autumn of dreams. This is weather for retreat.

I start thinking about the garden reviewing process in November. After the end of season crescendo of dahlias and Japanese anemones but before the Christmas sparkles are out of the box. November seems as good as time as any, especially as this weather brings rather forcibly to mind that we are at the mercy of our climate, that we are unavoidably bound up with the air that we breathe, the sun that shines on our skin, and the rain that falls on

our plants.

From the safety of indoors if you can, with a good coat and stout boots on if you can't, take a bit of time to look at your garden with a bit of distance. Emotional distance, physical distance. Take photos, look back through your phone at pictures you took during the year. Before you judge (it or yourself), before you leap to any big conclusions or resolutions for next season, let's ask the one question that rules them all.

What is your garden *for*?

Your first answer might be simple. Flowers, maybe. Some leaves to eat in summer. For food. For beauty. To hide the neighbour's washing line. For somewhere to sit in the summer. Can I invite you to get a little deeper?

If you had asked me ten years ago, I would have said that my garden was an expression of pure defiance. It was created in response to abuse and bullying at work and it was a way of me making sense of myself out of the context of my job. Desperately trying to

find an identity that was separate to being a psychologist. I knew about gardening but not a lot about flower farming. There were lots of rows of things, trees that were planted as maiden whips, annuals. It was tentative but it was there. I was there.

My next intentions for my field were for shameless bait. I really wanted my seeds to be featured in glossy magazines. (I have seen through many of the capitalism seductions now, but the sleekness of Gardens Illustrated still creeps under my defences) and I thought if I had a cutting edge, professionally designed, Zeitgeist-reflecting field of matrix planting, then photographers would queue up to feature it. A domestic Hauser & Wirth. They didn't of course and because I didn't design it, I didn't love it like it was mine. The heights were wrong. The plants were wrong. It just wasn't me.

So now? What do I want now? This last year has seen a huge shift in how I see the world and my own place in it. I think as I start to distance myself more from my job, I realise how important the bigger picture is to me. The world beyond the Instagram squares, the reality of the lives of people who have not had all the privilege and the lucky throw of the dice that I have had. Maybe it's guilt, but if I leave child protection behind, can it all just be David Austins and artfully ruffled linen tablecloths? I think you can guess the answer to that.

And so the eyes that are looking at my field are radical eyes. The-time-is-now eyes. The oh my god, we have got to do something because we cannot rely on the people in power to EVER do the right thing for anyone except themselves. Except possibly when they are trying to do the right thing for their cronies.

Revolutionary eyes.

And so I have printed out the ground plans again, and there will be revolutionary planting. Organic, biodynamic, regenerative planting.

The inner squares of my flower growing area will be gifted to my village and will form a micro-farm for growing food for my community. It is looking like a very real possibility that we will be offered a larger plot of land next year but we cannot wait. It is so tempting to put off change until it is easy.

And for every hour, every month, every year we put it off, the temperature rises. The rich get richer. The sea levels put more land and more people at risk.

So this year, what my garden is for is for being the change that I care about.

Composting practices that take carbon out of the atmosphere, the baking of biochar,



gardening that increase the biodiversity of my soil, that grows food (and flowers) that massively reduces the number of plastic bags of lettuce that are bought by me and my neighbours via shuttle runs to the little Sainsburys on the south edge of Taunton.

You may notice the shift in the business too. We are making big changes in the packaging we source and how we buy in seeds. It will mean that we are not going to be selling some of the really popular bred (and therefore owned by the big seed companies) cut flower seeds, we are going to be moving to only open-pollinated varieties of seeds.

In the short term, it is likely that we will lose business because we won't stock Rudbeckia 'Sahara', but that will just have to be what it is. As we are going to be buying in, we are going through the process of selecting which seed producers we want to financially support and to source from. Small, family owned, organic. Biodynamic where possible. The Seed Cooperative, Vital-Seeds.

I'll be sharing all these shifts and changes in Gather, of course. And I do hope you will join me in your own way.

Revolution starts at home. Or in the garden anyway.



MONDAY
15 NOVEMBER

-

Every week, I talk to you about how I still have sweet peas. And I promise, every time I tell you, I think it is going to be the last. And yet, every time, it isn't.

WEDNESDAY
17 NOVEMBER

-

Dahlias. Still glorious, gorgeous dahlias. I had already cut some Labyrinth for the background of filming my interview with Éva but today, I find the curliest, twirliest of all the last dinnerplates. They have been sat on my kitchen table for most of the day before I realise I have also brought a slug indoors.

THURSDAY
18 NOVEMBER

-

The first real chill in the morning. I go to Hemyock and drive back along the same top road, lined with beeches, that I filmed last week. Over seven days, every single leaf has transformed from dazzling gold to a deep, rich copper. I sense that the next time I see them they will have shed their glorious colours entirely.

The first fire in the evening.

SATURDAY
20 NOVEMBER

-

The most glorious warm, glowing sunshine. The sky is wide and blue and the woods are bathed in gold. The world is the colour of bracken. My house is full of ribbons and boxes and seeds. Christmas has begun.

05

AN AUTUMN WREATH

Wreaths are synonymous with winter. They remind us that, although we cut our year off on the 31st of December and start afresh on the 1st of January, this is but folly. Nature and the seasons know no such transition, they simply blend, magically and inexorably from dusk into sunset, from night into day, from season to season.

Wreaths remind us of this, the ever-turning wheel of the year. Not only does that feel very pertinent and touching at this time; this dark November where it sometimes feels as if summer was just a memory, and that spring will never return again. But autumn was made for wreaths. Even now, the hedgerows are stuffed with branches and berries. Many of the hips have gone and the holly berries rarely last until December, but there is still plenty of colour to forage.

Autumn is also when the foliage sheds and you can see vines. Actual vines sometimes (it is possible to harvest buckets of grapes from the Old Mill next door) but also wild clematis, honeysuckle and, my favourite,

akebia. Akebia, also known as the chocolate vine, grows prolifically for me, although flowers somewhat disappointingly. However, when the leaves have started to come off, the long, strong, dark stems make the best loose wreaths. When I say loose, I just mean that they are not woven. My best ever wreath was a handful of stems I hacked off the plant because I kept tripping over them, tied in a circle, and held together by a bit of string. It is nearly five years old now and spends most of the year outside, nailed to the studio door.

Proof of how old it is, the one in the picture on the next page is the same one as in my book, *Grow and Gather*, on page 195.

In fact, the studio, viewed from the cottage, looks naked and bare without it. Now I have dressed the wreath base very ruggedly with dog rose hips (just secured with a little string), I will probably go and hang it back there again. We can very much enjoy it from a distance, and it will act as a very elegant bird feeder for any wildlife who wants to snack on the hips.

*Materials that make
wonderful wreath bases:*

- / Hazel
- / Willow
- / Honeysuckle
- / Grape vines
- / Wild clematis (Old Man's Beard)
- / Virginia creeper
- / Silver birch (just grab it in handfuls and tie the ends together)

So much more fun than mossing up a copper wire frame. And if you love your wreath and decorate it with dried foliage and flowers, you only need to stick a gold silk ribbon in it mid-December, and you are all ready for Christmas.



Jobs for November:

PLANTING NARCISSI

If your bulb order has come through, and mine arrived yesterday, then you can start getting on with putting narcissi and other spring bulbs in the ground now (not tulips unless you have had a first hard frost).

I find narcissi and the like absolutely tough as boots so there really isn't much that can go wrong. I have planted so many in the last few years, I wasn't going to add to my collection, but the rumour going round the mill is that daffodils are the new tulips and I am wondering if I shouldn't get a few more. If I do, it will probably be Minnow, one of my absolute favourite dwarf varieties.

If you would like perfect paperwhites for the table on Christmas day, pot up the bulbs in the middle of November.

If it isn't the middle of November yet, can I suggest you write this in your diary now? You think you'll remember. I never do.

These need to be special, pre-chilled bulbs but they are easy to get hold of. Pot up in gritty compost and leave somewhere cold (below 10 degrees). Once they are up and growing strongly, bring them into the warmth. I find they always need twiggy supports to stop them flopping. Luckily, I have a lot of twigginess around.

PLANTING GARLIC

There are only two vegetables that can be planted at this time of year: broad beans and garlic. I saved some garlic from this summer's harvest although I confess, I cannot remember what variety it is. I love growing garlic. Its timeline is so out of kilter with everything else that it is wonderful to have something to plant at such a damp and dark end of the growing season.

I will be doing broad beans too, but the slugs have been so incredibly prolific in the last month or so that I don't hold out much hope much growth this year.

PEONY CARE

Clear foliage from around any peonies and make sure they have clear soil all around them. Mulch a bit, but make sure not to put too much compost around the crown. Peonies will sulk if you bury them too deeply and you'll spend the rest of your days writing in to Gardeners' Question Time about why your peonies aren't flowering. Spoiler alert, the answer is always that they are planted too deep.

PLAN AHEAD

Start collecting bits and pieces (dried or evergreen) for decorating wreaths or for adding to Christmas presents. They'll look lovely in a pot on a windowsill whilst we are waiting for this endless November to pass.



LOOK OUT FOR BARE ROOT PLANTS

I will be topping up my roses this winter as well as planting many more trees and shrubs. The bare root catalogues tend to open in October with delivery starting from November. Remember the maxim to never buy a plant before you know where it is to be planted. Also, do as I say, not as I do.

PRESERVING HEDGEROW BOUNTY

Although the big trees are shedding, the hedges are still stoically green. This week I will be capturing the very last of this. Hawthorn leaves for the dye pot, and sloes for the freezer.

The thing that I have loved the most about natural dyeing is the lack of relationship between the material and the resultant colour. Who knew hawthorn leaves would yield orange?

If you can find a cherry tree, especially a wild one, the colours are quite glorious now. There is a tree in the hedgerow in the back field that is so deep red as to be purple. Every time I visit it, I stand and stare at the colours, the lime trees that share the field boundary shedding their more papery yellow leaves around us. If you bring some home, they dry brilliantly in a book or a flower press. Anywhere else and they just curl up and shatter.

I am also drying as many apples as I can at the moment. It is tricky as I do seem to eat them as soon as they come out of the oven. I worked out I have eaten the equivalent to four apples in one day, simply through nibbling the slices as they were drying on the rack. I am not sure that was quite what they had in mind when they prescribed an apple a day.

MAKING LEAF MOULD

Like compost, but finer and crumblier and altogether even more magic. Fill old compost bags with fallen leaves. Oak and hornbeam are the ultimate, but I use a lot of lime too. Sprinkle the leaves with water from a watering can (think evenly damp but not drenched), tie up the top of the bag, and punch a few holes in it to let the air in. I also have a cage made of chicken wire specifically for leaf mould and I was utterly crushed when Sue of Nant-y-Bedd told me that that was a waste of time and she just scatters the leaves over her beds in the autumn and the worms take care of the rest.

To each their own...



06

GROWING TULIPS

Why would I put tulips in the autumn journal? Because November is the time to plant them, and because if you don't buy yours soon then they will all be sold out. I have already missed out on the sack of Dom Pedro that I was hoping to get and the only ones left to be bought are five whole pounds each. Yes, I did still buy them, and I don't regret it at all.

There really is only one person to talk to about tulips, and when I was making my wishlist, I went straight to Polly Nicholson of Bayntun Flowers and the interview she did with Gather last spring.

Grab a pen, because you are going to want to make notes. This is what Polly has to say about tulips.

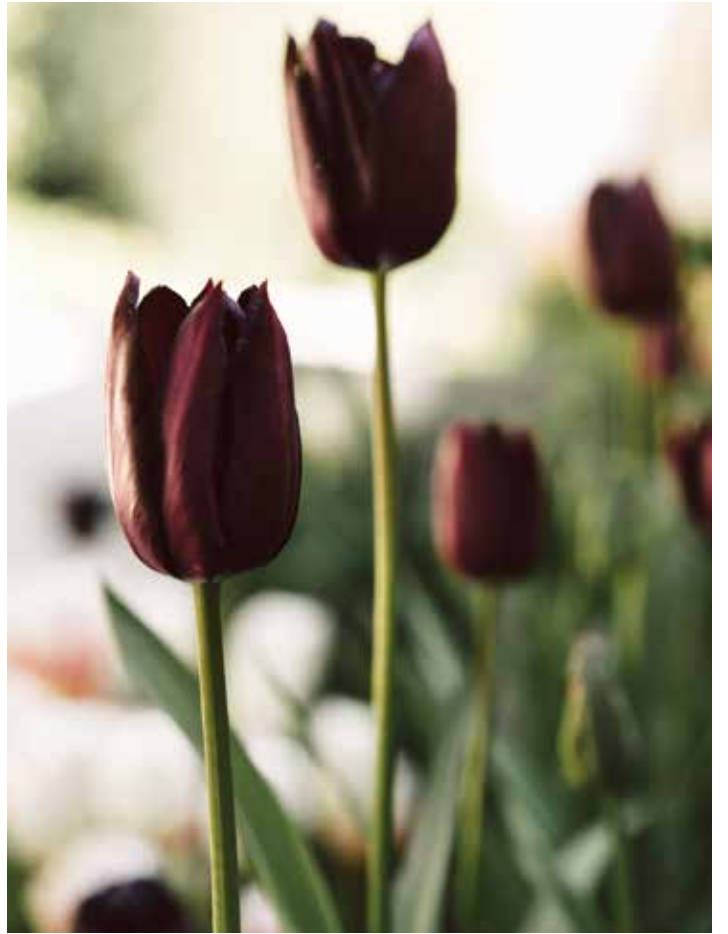
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Polly: Spring is really about tulips here at Bayntun Flowers. Tulips are our main specialist crop, and we plant them here, there and everywhere – there are short rows in the

walled garden, long runs sheltering under hoops in the flower field and containers packed full of them dotted across the length and breadth of the garden. These are what I call our annual crop, the bulbs which we buy, grow and throw (or more accurately compost or replant back-of-house) every year. In addition to these c.10,000 bulbs, we supplement all the perennial plantings by around 30%, add to the species collections, and replant all the historic.

The historic are a complete labour of love, my love, and it is lucky I do love them so much as they are extremely painstaking to grow. Each year we wait for them to finish flowering, deadhead the whole lot, and let the foliage die back. Some time in midsummer, weather dependent, they are all dug up by hand, counted, sorted, labelled in racks, and left to dry for the next few months. Late autumn we clean each bulb and grade the bulblets, and plant and label them all over again.

All 3,000 of them.



Grace: You are known for your love of tulips and I have to admit, you introduced me to a level of tulips that I didn't appreciate enough. Seeing Dom Pedro in your garden for the first time a few years ago was a truly memorable experience. How did (historic) tulips come to be so important in your life?

Polly: Tulips were the first flowers that I grew when we moved to Wiltshire in the autumn of 2007, and their appearance through the black, loamy soil the following spring made me feel as though I had arrived. I had undertaken a horticultural diploma at The English Gardening School a few years earlier, and we had had a long, narrow garden attached to our previous house in London, but never any sizeable beds to fill. Tulips were a quick fix confidence builder, but they captured my heart. Suffice to say I ordered more the following year, and the year after that. With over 3,000 tulip varieties currently registered it was easy to get carried away and I did – ordering up to 15,000 a year at one point to fill the flower field and containers around the garden.

My fascination with historic tulips perhaps came as an antidote to the glut of modern tulips which the catalogues throw at us each year.

Historic tulips, or Florists' tulips (the word

florist being used in the old sense, meaning a flower grower who exhibits their flowers, as opposed to a floral designer) are notoriously hard to grow, generally producing very few bulblets or daughter bulbs, and are prone to Tulip Breaking Virus, or TBV, which causes solid coloured breeder bulbs to 'break' into broken or Rembrandt bulbs.

Without going into a lengthy lesson (for that I highly recommend *The Tulip* by Anna Pavord, the best book written on tulips) TBV weakens the tulip until it eventually stops producing new bulblets, and that variety of tulip becomes extinct.

The most famous extinct tulip of all is T. Semper Augustus, with striking blood red streaks against a white ground, and reputed to be the most valuable tulip to be sold during the period of Tulipmania in Holland between 1634-1637.

The historic bulbs I grow date back to the early 1600s and can be seen as endangered species, rare breeds that need to be nurtured to prevent them following the fate of so many of their ancestors. And these tulips do indeed have a feel of antiquity to them which is unrivalled in any of the modern cultivars.

Dom Pedro, a rich coffee brown with maroon undertones is a fine example of this. It compares well with the almost-black Queen of Night in terms of stem length, head size



and vase life, yet easily surpasses it with regards to its depth of shine and intensity of colour. It has a well-worn patina to it, as if it has been buffed with a soft cloth and a coating of wax year upon year like an item of furniture passed down the generations.

I have an ever-increasing collection of around 50 different Dutch historic tulips, most of them sourced from Hortus Bulborum (the living museum of tulips based in Limmen, just north of Amsterdam) and around two dozen English Florists' tulips, courtesy of the Wakefield and North of England Tulip Society. These easily identifiable shallow cup-shaped tulips cannot be purchased, and are apportioned to members each autumn after the society's AGM. Receiving the small parcel through the post is like Christmas coming early.

Historic tulips now form the nexus of my tulips, but I do still fall prey to the delights of the modern annual tulips. Who can resist a Triumph tulip such as the deeply scented burnt umber Cairo, registered in 1999, or Disarrono, a stunning Rembrandt imitator from 2000?

Grace: The desert island question. If you could only take three tulip bulbs with you, which ones would they be and why?

Polly: Can I choose three historic from my

collection and three others? The historic would be the ones I would rescue in a fire, or perhaps more fittingly a flood, but I wouldn't do without the others either. First the historic:

TULIPA ABSALON, dating from 1780, a broken or Rembrandt type. A brownish red of incredible depth streaked with egg-yolk yellow, it falls into the 'bizarre' category of tulip colorations (there are three recognised colour categories of Florists' tulips: Rose, Bybloemen and Bizarre. Bizarres always have a yellow base with brown, orange or bright red petals). It used to be really hard to obtain, but is now quite readily available in the mainstream bulb catalogues, which makes it no less special to me. In fact I love seeing others growing it and deriving the same sort of pleasure from it that I do.

TULIPA OLD TIMES, registered in 1919, a single late breeder of soft raspberry pink edged with primrose yellow – another bizarre colouration in fact. It sounds hideous but the colours seep gently into each other and the overall feel is one of faded old-fashioned grandeur. It has attractive lancet shaped petals, good stem length and impressive staying power in the ground and in a vase. This is a reliable tulip to press, if that is of interest, as it is less fleshy than some of the more modern hybrids which mould easily due to their higher moisture content.



TULIPA JAMES WILD, c.1890, an English florists' tulip would be my third choice partly because the bulbs I grow have the right qualities for prize-winners - and did indeed win first and second prizes in three classes at the Wakefield and North of England Show when it was last held in 2019. The deep mahogany petals are the pre-requisite half-cup shape and have an extraordinary sheen, comparable in depth of lustre to Dom Pedro, as above. This is also a bizarre, with a yellow base and the faintest of yellow streaks scoring lines up the centres of the petals.

And three of the rest:

TULIPA BALLERINA, altogether easier to get hold of and to grow, a tangerine orange lily-flowered tulip (Division 6) with a neat nipped-in waist and a delicious honeyed scent. Like many lily-flowered varieties it will survive year-on-year if left in the ground, so this is one to plant in the border and forget about, unlike the historic above which should be dug up and dried each summer.

TULIPA MYSTIK VAN EIJK, new to me this year, a salmon pink Darwin hybrid (Division 4) with typically long stems. It has been the first of my tulips to flower, beating the classic Apeldoorn, and has withstood the freezing temperatures and hailstorms which the last few weeks have thrown at us. I have only grown this one in the flower field thus far but it looks as though it will have good

perennial properties – that said I am not mad about having such sized heads in a perennial planting as they dominate the more elegant lily-flowered and viridiflora varieties. In a vase it needs to be paired with nothing else, its colour and form more than hold their own.

TULIPA BLACK HERO or Black Parrot?

It's difficult to choose between these two almost-blacks. Black parrot is one of the only parrots (Division 10) which I grow, having tired of the heavily distorted heads of most others, which seem to spontaneously snap off because they are so top heavy, not a handy trait for a farmed flower. The smallish, neatish Black Parrot has wavy edged petals of a glamorous purple-black, the narrow leaves a complementary grey-green, and it is an altogether pleasing perennial tulip. Black Hero is equally exotic in a more statuesque way. A really glossy double double it was bred from Queen of Night and is one of the most useful tulips I know, serving as an excellent cut flower, reliably perennial (you will note that I like my tulips to work as perennials) and works with almost any other tulip in a container context. Its only drawback is that it is very sensitive to hail and its burnished black petals become easily pockmarked.

If you are not an over-perfectionist like me this should not be a problem.

/

Grace: Are there other plants that you grow alongside the tulips to complement them?

Polly: I don't tend to grow tulips herbaceously in the traditional sense, as annuals arrayed through borders amongst a range of perennial flowers and shrubs, although I do have a grid of four rose beds which are underplanted with *T. Black Hero* and *T. Virichic*. Last year we grew hundreds of wallflowers from seed and planted these in and amongst, but we found that the timing was slightly out – the tulips flowered before the wallflowers – and that it was very labour intensive having to pot the wallflowers on, then plant them out, then pull them up.

This year we have gone without any bedding plants, and we actually prefer the cleaner, clearer appearance of the beds. No doubt due in part to the fact that Kristy Ramage came for a training day and helped my team construct the most beautiful hazel domes for the roses, which we pruned in to the structures in one continuous (if very slow) coordinated balletic movement.

The only other tulips we use herbaceously are species or botanical tulips. Hannah, my head gardener, introduced me to species tulips about five years ago, and we have been experimenting with them ever since. We grow *T. Sylvestris* in woodland beds

down by the river, alongside the native *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* and *N. Tenby*. These are beds of jewelled treasures, and the bright yellow of this elegant woodland tulip complements the blues of *Hepatica*, *Omphaloides* and *Scilla* particularly well.

Another species tulip is *T. Whitallii*, named after the plant hunter Edward Whittall. This bronze species variety thrives at the front of our pool border, and basks in the heat reflected from the exceedingly tall mellowed brick wall which runs the length of that part of the garden. It makes its appearance at the beginning of April each year amongst the fresh foliage of thalictrum, fennel, and intersectional peonies and opens up its neat petals to the sun.

Within a container context we play with different complementary plants each year. Last year it was cardoons, inspired by Arthur Parkinson. We planted them at the same time as the tulips, enjoyed the foil of their grey toothed leaves throughout the tulip life cycle, and then removed them with the spent bulbs. At that point we either potted them up to be stored in our backstage holding bay, or replanted them in the same containers with our summer schemes.

The year before that we went big on wallflowers, and we have had forget-me-not-phases. I never tire of forget-me-nots.

Grace: Could you share a bit about what growing conditions suit tulips the best? Do you have any tips for growing the best blooms? People always seem to mention grit and planting them deeper than you think...

Polly: We use sand for all of our historic tulips, a 5cm bed of horticultural sand raked across the beds. The bulbs are placed on them, pointy side up, then the beds are backfilled with topsoil.

The sand serves three purposes: it prevents the bulb from rotting or moulding in the soil, it provides a layer of drainage, and it improves the soil year on year when it is dug in.

We used to treat our annual crop in the same way, but decided that it was a waste of time and money as the bulbs are inexpensive to buy, and only expected to last for one year. They are not an investment in time and money in the same way that the historic are.

Likewise, the historic trenches are dug deeper than the annual trenches, harder work at both ends of the season but for a greater return. Planting the bulbs at too shallow a depth can lead to shorter stems, or even flowers seeming to bloom straight from the ground. The annuals are ideally planted at a depth deep enough not to stunt growth, but shallow enough to allow the whole flower, bulb and all, to be pulled out at harvesting time. It's tricky to get it just right...

Where to buy tulip bulbs

For excellent quality bulbs, lovely people, and excellent collections, I (Grace) can wholeheartedly recommend Nyssens. One of the things I really like about them is that they do ready made collections based on some combinations put together by the incredibly tasteful Arne Maynard and printed in Gardens Illustrated.

Now, the most exclusive. The 'oh my god, you spent how much on a single bulb?' one. Tulip fever was thing for a reason, and I am not immune. Jacques Amand is the place for the most beautiful, the most exclusive, the most perfect bulbs. Many are old and rare, and the captions often include the words 'Seldom offered' which makes any resistance I had entirely futile. I had the pleasure of seeing Absalon in real life at Bayntun Flowers last spring, and I will not forget it in a hurry. It was a bit like meeting a film star in real life, it was so beautiful it left me sort of speechless, but with an impression that this was the only reasonable reaction, and that it had been leaving people speechless for hundreds of years. If you want Absalon, you need Jacques Amand.

I would also add that if you are growing organically, there is a new company (I think run by Urquhart & Hunt) growing and selling organic bulbs and tulips, Organic Bulbs.



TUESDAY
23 NOVEMBER

-

The frost that finally did for the dahlias.
There have been three or four nights
when I thought that was it and it wasn't.
But this morning, there is blackness on
the leaves and the petals have taken on
that beautiful outline of frost.

FRIDAY
26 NOVEMBER

-

As we go to bed, there is hail rattling
on the thin leaded windows, and a draft
coming through the thatch. Hugo usually
sleeps curled up at the end of the bed like
a cat. Tonight, he is up by the pillows,
making the most of the warmth.

SUNDAY 28 NOVEMBER

-

I still have roses. Can you possibly
believe it? Four perfect, speckle-backed
Mme Alfred Carriere's with more to
come. If this goes on much longer
(and the weather is predicted to warm
up again after one last, bone-chilling
night tonight) there will be roses on the
Christmas table.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING.
GATHER · CHRISTMAS WILL BE
RELEASED ON 30 NOVEMBER

*With love,
Grace*