

GATHER · CHRISTMAS

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PREFACE

There has been too little magic in the world recently. Too little joy. Too little, if I may employ a particularly festive word, cheer.

As the year slumps towards an end, and the season's wheel comes towards its lowest point before we turn our faces once more to the sun, Christmas is the one shining star.

Christmas is only half made up of this difficult year. The rest of it is memory and tradition, scent and sequins. It is the taste of smoked salmon and the smell of metal polish on the copper jug.

If you are after a countdown to Christmas, a timetable for the turkey, or recommendation for festoon lights for the front of your house, you are in the wrong place.

The Gather Christmas is foraged, natural and accompanied by nothing more stressful than Carols from King's and the very best, very cold, champagne.



Advent

My first grown up job was in a garden centre. I remember the day that Princess Diana died and how I spent the day pricing up fake Christmas trees. It was August.

Ever since then, I have had a fear of launching into the festive season too early, lest I may tire of it by half way through Advent, as if there is only a finite amount of the festive spirit to go around. I have found that the trick is to engage little and often, taking each day in December as special in its own right, not something to be counted away, like a child marking off sleeps to Santa.

The first of these wonderful season celebrations?

Advent.

28 NOVEMBER

However early we start on the dog walk, it is never early enough. The last bit is always a race against the encroaching darkness. The landscape is more intricate now. Every tree is now a silhouette, stark and linear against the setting sun. As we come up the lane from Heale, we hear the cackle of geese being put to bed.

1 DECEMBER

A morning in the field. It takes a little time to get anything done because I am distracted by noticing the changes brought on by December. The apple espaliers are very much in need of their winter prune. The autumn flowering cherry blossom is the best I have ever seen it. The dahlias are blackened but there are a few blooms hanging on.

2 DECEMBER

The earliest of the hellebores, *Helleborus niger*, the Christmas rose, is flowering in the trough by the back door. I want to tell you this as a joyous and remarkable event but I just don't like them. I don't know if I got an odd variety (it is a planted out specimen from the ones I had in urns at Forde Abbey when I dressed it for Christmas many years ago) but it just looks rather plastic. I'll hold out for the slate hellebores. *Then* I'll be excited.



01

A COTTAGE CHRISTMAS

My cottage is made for Christmas. Despite its draughty windows and the gap under the front door that lets the leaves come through. Despite the fact that the path through the kitchen garden at the back is lethal in icy weather. Despite even the fact that the ceilings are far too low (and the space far too small) for anything resembling a proper Christmas tree.

What it lacks in practicality, my cottage makes up for with charm.

There are stones in the walls that were probably once part of the church next door. Huge chunks of blue lias completely out of proportion to the humbleness of the cottage's habit. A name and a number are carved into one stone by the woodburner, underneath the bread oven. William 1584.

There is a beam above the inglenook that is thought to come from a ship. There are holes

for pegs from which to hang a garland. There is a narrow shelf above that fits pine cones and a copper wire of fairy lights. The kitchen and the sitting room are practically on top of each other, which means you are never more than a sniff away from the scent of mince pies or baking apples.

Foraged bags of Scots pine wait in the cool of the boot room, ready for their moment. The bedroom window looks out onto the middle branches of the huge and ancient lime trees of our village, their canopies thick with mistletoe. If any of the branches break, it takes out all the phones and electricity in the village (we memorably passed from one New Year's Eve into New Year's Day in a complete blackout) and so the council are religious about taking the mistletoe out to stop it weighing down the limbs that stretch over our life lines.



The cottage being a Church Cottage, there is also a churchyard. A tall holly tree which always berries well. Walls held together by strands of ivy, although the berried ivy seems to do better here. An unidentified conifer with stiff grey needles which just happens to lean over my neighbour's wall. And possibly the best of all, there is old man's beard absolutely everywhere.

The boundaries between inside and outside soften around this time of year. We may spend less time outside than in the fresh exuberance of spring, or than in the heady days of summer. My dog walks are shorter now, crammed between rushing home from work and the darkness that not even a good torch feels able to vanquish. I am not going to get started on the mud.

And so, slowly, nature creeps indoors. The windowsills are still cluttered with drying dahlias and roses that I haven't got round to throwing away. There are twigs from when I brought the ombre beech leaves in. Grass seed heads that I saved from the worst of the winter weather. A teasel that India sent me with a parcel of bowls and twine.

And more intentionally, a bowl of cassia bark from Afghanistan alongside over-sized pine cones collected by a friend from Saltram in Devon. I hang larch cones draped with gold silk ribbon from hooks on the wall. Circles of wreaths and swags of garlands start to elevate the sense of occasion. There are more and more candles introduced to the cottage, and then removed again, because there are too many twigs.

Living a thatched cottage, I am careful with fire.



3 DECEMBER

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.

5 DECEMBER

Half the village is in darkness, the other light. A tree at the top of the hill has brought down a power line and we are divided into those who can boil a kettle and those who cannot. I drive to Axminster to drop off and collect stock for Christmas orders. The views are as breathtaking as ever, but there is evidence of damage too. Branches across the road. Debris scattered. The landscape has changed colour overnight. From warm, coppery bronze, to deep mossy grey.

7 DECEMBER

I drive home as the moon is rising. A tiny sliver of a thing, parchment coloured as it comes over the hill. The thin moon and the clear skies mean that the dogs and I walk without a torch, lit by the multitude of stars.



02

ACTIVITIES FOR ADVENT

Name the thing that you need more of in the dark December. This is the theme of your month.

Joy, hope, peace, spaciousness or inspiration.

For content, mine is *SIMPLICITY*. I think my word for 2023 generally is going to be simplicity, but for now, I just want to imbue a sense of simplicity into this pre-Christmas craziness.

You might expect me to say that I can think my way to a sense of internal minimalism. That mental clarity and a bit of meditation will clear out some of the Santa Claus clutter.

Not so, my lovely, not so. We don't *think* ourselves different, we do. There is no point imagining myself a certain way, I must take steps towards it.

When I say steps, it could be activities, affirmations, journal prompts, anything at all that moves you towards how you want to feel during this most frantic of seasons.

Have you got a piece of paper? You are going to want to make a list. Think of the feeling you want to have in December, and then write down how you might get that feeling. If you can have one thing for every day of Advent, then you are guaranteed a wonderful December.

To feel *CONNECTED*, you might book a table at your favourite restaurant and take the time to celebrate love with your other half. Another day you might ask them how they are and really listen to the answer. It might be to spend half an hour with small children and a board game. It might suggest you get in touch with someone you love but you haven't spoken to in too long.

JOY. I think everyone is different with this one. What sparks joy for me might leave you cold. Also, it is all too easy to do joyful things in a joyless way. If you are going to put your boots on and crunch through frosty grass, really put your boots on and crunch through it. Breathe deeply. *Feel* it. If you are going to open a bottle of champagne, get the best



flutes (saucers if you are really fancy) out and laugh long and hard.

PEACE. I personally don't think ten minutes peace and quiet is a big ask for everyday life, but I also know that I can't remember when I sat still for ten whole minutes. (Driving doesn't count.) No screens, no phone, no radio on, no writing shopping lists or mentally planning the next day.

Here is my list for achieving a simple December

DOING THE CHRISTMAS CARDS

EARLY: Yes, I am doing them. It would be simpler to just abandon them altogether, but that would be throwing the baby out with the bath water. I want a simple life, not an anti-social one.

Also, I have just taken delivery from the printer of my absolutely gorgeous Gather Christmas cards by Rob Mackenzie. They are, entirely fittingly, very very simple in their design.

I also spent a lot of my time in Post Offices at this time of year and I really do not have any excuse for not buying a book of fifty first class stamps.

TAKING TIME TO CLEAR THE

[PHYSICAL] CLUTTER: Advent is designed to be a period of anticipation, of preparation. Yes, I am spending the last weekend of November having a great big clear out.

WHAT I AM NOT DOING: If someone else can do it better than me and I don't love it, I am outsourcing. This includes Christmas cake and Christmas pudding, mince pies and Beef Wellington. If these things, with their scents and traditions, bring you absolute joy, do them. The idea is that we choose what we do based on how we want to feel, not because we feel we should. Sourdough bread is easy for me and is simple so it stays on the list, but Waitrose can make the jam I spread on it. I will also be making mulled cider on a regular basis. With all the trimmings....

CANDLES EVERYWHERE: The quickest & easiest way to make a cottage look beautiful is to fill it with candlelight. My village has standards and, as a parish councillor, there is comment if I do not live up to them. This includes everyone joining in with the Christmas tree festival and dressing their front windows. I do not have room for a tree and I do not have the desire to fill my single west-facing window with light-blocking foliage and fairy lights. I have a beautiful hurricane lantern and a large church candle, and that is going to have to do.



EVERYONE'S A WINNER: Give according to the needs of others. As someone who thinks a lot about sustainability and reducing waste throughout the gardening year, you cannot imagine that I would throw this to the wind just because every media is full of advertisements and the supermarkets have glued a bow to a tin of biscuits. There is a whole section on presents later in this guide, but I have already had the chat with the important people that I would prefer a donation to charity instead of a present, and I'll be giving the cash I would have spent on them to the local food bank. My mental health and stress levels, the planet, the people using the food bank all benefit. I don't honestly think anyone loses that much. My gifts were never that good before.

So what is on your list? Write it on your best paper in your best pen, and pin it somewhere prominent. And you are done. A simple way of reminding ourselves every single day that life isn't meant to be a rush and a trial, and that December isn't meant to be a haze of panic buying and mince pies for lunch as we rush to meet holiday deadlines.

There can be moments of stillness, wherever and whenever.

December

A dark month, lit with candles

“**The** week before Christmas, when snow seemed to lie thickest, was the moment for carol-singing; and when I think back to those nights it is to the crunch of snow and to the lights of the lanterns on it”

- Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie*



8 DECEMBER

Various road closures across Somerset means diversions. The mist is thick and the roads windy. New routes through old landscape feels like an adventure. Familiar hills and landmarks appear different from unexpected angles.

9 DECEMBER

We wake to a deep frost. Poppers dashes around in circles with ice between her toes. The flowers look magical etched in frost but for once the vegetables are even more beautiful. The curves of the kale highlighted. The lettuces I put in a little late are still young but their colour is intensified in the cold.

10 DECEMBER

The first hampers are starting to be posted out. They are so beautiful. I basically make presents that I would absolutely adore to receive; these are stuffed with gorgeous things. Bundles of seeds, snips, ribbons, labels, pencils. Everything you need. There are lots of discussions about ethically-sourced gifts and sustainable Christmases. One of my inspirations, Syreeta Challenger wrote about this this week. If you do not know their story, please do go and have a look at their Instagram or website. The roots of their business are in recovery from a significant brain injury. a partnership forged in incredibly difficult circumstances indeed, and I defy anyone to hear about it without being humbled and awed by their strength.

I am delighted that Rob Mackenzie, Syreeta's partner, illustrated the Gather Christmas cards this year.

03

WREATHING

The circle of life

I am not going to lie to you, wreaths make me go weak at the knees. There is a moment in early December that (if you spend any time on Instagram at least) you think you simply cannot bear the sight of another one. They are everywhere. On the front of Homes and Gardens and on the TV ads for supermarkets and frozen canapes. Enough with the wreaths.

And then one catches my eye and I catch my breath. They are usually the ones that are wilder than usual, or just a bit bolder. Ones that would poke a postman's eye out. I covet the soft shagginess of the creations of Kirstie from *The Wilde*. There are whole books written about wreaths; by far the best is Worm London's 'Wreaths', although Studio Choo's *The Wreath Recipe Book* comes a very close second.

Both these books cover wreaths around the year and there is some faffing about with trying to get flowers into twiggy bases, or planting succulents into moss. I know these can look terribly adventurous and all rather impressive, but you can keep your summer

wreaths. The circles only come into their own in my mind when the year is on the turn. I want to be celebrating the circularity of the seasons, the seamless blending of darkness, through the longest night, into hope.

I do not want a wreath on my door until December the 1st but when I am ready for it, my goodness, I want a corker of a wreath.

What you need:

I will expand on most of these things below, but just in case you need a shopping list, here it is.

- / A copper wreath frame
- / Hay or moss for wadding
- / Reel wire or twine
- / Secateurs
- / Foliage, or dried flowers & grasses
- / Ribbon

THE COPPER RING

These have double circles to give width and body to your wreath. You can try with a single strand wreath but you will find that things

spin round and it will drive you mad. There is a place for these and I am an absolute fan of my Aerende brass ring. It takes three pieces of grass, a dried strawflower and a length of ribbon and it looks a million dollars. I probably wouldn't put it on the front door though.

You can get the wreath rings easily and cheaply online (Hobbycraft, The Range, eBay). I would also direct you to your local florist; they will probably have boxes and boxes full of them, so it is worth asking.

The size of the wreath frame does matter. Because I like super-sized wreaths I always start with a frame that is big. This is a mistake, it means it will look out of proportion with your door. I would very much suggest going for a small frame and add a *lot* of material for size. Unless you live in a stately home or a barn conversion, 30cm diameter is about right, 36cm if you absolutely must.

Do not be seduced into buying a set of ten simply because it's about the same price as buying one. These are almost infinitely reusable if you take them apart at the end of the season and you will not want a stack of nine hanging around in your house for the rest of your life.

Take it from one who knows.

WADDING

Traditionally, something is wrapped and secured onto the wreath frame, although I am aware that some mavericks just wire their foliage straight on, which makes me wince a bit. The wadding does two things: it gives the wreath a lovely mounded, opulent shape, and it retains moisture around the cut stems of your foliage so that the wreath stays perkily longer.

For many people, this means mossing the wreath. I get it; moss really does do all the things you want wadding to do, but I have always been a bit nervous about where it comes from. Moss always seems a bit too ecologically important to be harvested in industrial quantities. Remember how peat ended? Sort of like that. Also, it is quite hard to get in small quantities and you'll end up trying to open an account at a flower wholesalers at the beginning of December.

If you have moss in your lawn, by all means rake it up. Leave it for a little while for the insects to crawl out (and I can't promise you they'll be in a hurry to leave...) and then go for it.

But if you don't want to do this, what is the sustainable solution? Hay.

In my dreams, I inhabit a sort of endless Jilly Cooper novel and the scent of hay gladdens my heart. If you don't have a friendly local



farmer or stables (and you don't need a lot for a single wreath, certainly not even a small bale), then can I suggest you pop to a pet shop? A bag of best Timothy hay destined for rabbits and guinea pigs makes for the perfect wadding.

FOLIAGE

Generally, you can go one of two ways, evergreen or dried. India does a bit of both in her film, and the results are all the better for it. What I would say though is that evergreen wreaths don't find being inside much fun because the air is usually too dry and the temperature too warm. Wreaths made totally of dried material will not thank you for being exposed to the elements and they will generally disintegrate fast if they get wet or the weather is windy. So maybe start with where you want to put the wreath, and go from there.

If you are going for foliage then some generous conifers will be good for getting a good amount of bulk into the wreath, but do try and go for a variety of things. If you go through some pictures of wreaths you have really liked, this will give you an idea of how much variety you prefer. Just one variety with maybe a single addition of cones or texture can be really simple, calming and elegant. Olive foliage or eucalyptus if you want to be achingly cool. I'm really not sure that is

entering into the spirit though.

A real hodge podge mix of textures and tones can be really striking and dramatic. It's what does it for you.

I don't mean to be a snob, I promise I really don't, but just a few of one thing and a few of another thing and some orange slices and a pine cone and you have something incredibly mainstream and pedestrian. Please do go one way or the other.

Also, oranges go mouldy if they are on an outdoor wreath because of the dampness in the air. On the upside, the birds enjoy eating them.

How much foliage?

Ah yes. Not always the easiest question to answer. I would forage more rather than less because you aren't going to want to stop and go out foraging again once you're actually wreathing. Mostly because I am expecting it to be a long winter evening and for you to be at least three mulled wines up by the time you get to the end of your bundles. If you get two really solid branches (say three foot or so) of conifer and lots of other bits, you should be fine.

You want to know the best cheat for an abundant wreath? Go to a nursery, farm or

garden centre that sells Christmas trees and ask for some offcuts. You can probably fill your car boot with spruce and this will form the base. All you need to do now is get a few really special bits to add, and you're there.

My favourite foliage for wreaths

Spruce
Juniper
Ivy (berries and strands)
Holm oak
Larch
Scots pine
Anything twiggy, such as beech
Bay
Rosemary
Thyme

FORAGING

The usual advice applies; only forage where you have permission, don't take too much, treat the plants or trees with respect.

Freestyling vs bundling

You will notice (if you have watched the video) that India makes her wreath by adding the foliage, dried hydrangea and that insane sweetcorn foliage, piece by piece to the wreath and just binding them with wire where they are. This is absolutely possible and is probably quicker and easier if you are

doing a wreath with only a few different types of ingredients. However, this way also makes it more difficult to get an even effect all the way round.

If you would like to add lots of difference stems to your wreath and work with many textures, can I suggest you bundle?

This simply means creating little bundles of foliage, backed with a flat wide piece of foliage and then a good mix of some of your other bits on top. Some wispy, some flat, some round. Tie the stems at the base and you suddenly have something that looks rather than a giant's buttonhole for a winter wedding.

Repeat. You can make all the bundles the same if you would like a wreath that looks similar all the way round. I am a fan of a bit of variation, and a bit of contrast mixed in.

I always do fifteen bundles, and then run out. If you push the bundles up against each other quite a lot (and I suggest you do) you will get a lovely bushiness, but you will get through quite a lot of bundles. It's fine though, you can pause and do some more.

Or revert to freestyling and just tucking bits in. I have been known to do that too.

WHAT ELSE?

Reel wire. Order or buy this when you get your wreath ring, as the same places will also stock this. If you watch India wreathing you will see how much easier it is to just use one long piece of wire. If you are committed to composting the whole thing in January, you can use a roll of string (and I often do). It's easier on the hands but you never get quite the same tension so your wreath may be a bit more wayward. And if may be none the worse for that.

SECATEURS

Probably not your best Niwaki snips for this one. Evergreen branches can be tough and, worse than that, some exude a very sticky sap and you will clog up your snips otherwise. (Wear gloves if you are sensitive.)

Step by step wreathing

It might be worth a re-watch of India's video at this point. Although, you may be feeling completely confident and totally all over it, in which case, crack on.

Forage, harvest, or collect ingredients and have them all to hand.

Go over the ingredients list again. Have you got everything? Put a sheet or a dustsheet down if you are precious about your carpets

because you are probably going to get hay and larch cones everywhere.

Tie the end of your wire to the wreath frame. I'm sure there is a knack to this but I'm not sure what it is, just keep twisting the wire around one of the joins until it feels like it is securely attached.

I find it easier to tip the hay into a box or trug. Pull out handfuls and hold them onto the frame. Wrap the wire around the hay. Pull the reel through the middle of the frame. Repeat, adding handfuls of hay and moving the wire along a bit every handful. This really is easier to demonstrate rather than explain. India's video has this step at minute 3:05. I left every minute of her mossaing the wreath in because I think it is really helpful to watch. (She asked me to put that bit on fast forward because she ran out of chat.)

You will take a few goes to get the tension right and to feel how much to move the wire along each time, but once you hit your stride, you'll be flying. Remember, it doesn't have to be perfect. No one is ever going to see this bit.

Put the wreath to one side if you are going to bundle. Don't cut the wire. Make sure you have your bits ready if you are going to freestyle.

Prepare your bundles and line them all up.

Lay the first bundle flat on the wreath. The stems should be flat on the moss, preferably covering it. If you have narrow bundles (or wide moss) alternate them twisting in and twisting out so the coverage is a bit wider.

Wrap the reel wire over the stems a few times to really secure the bundle.

Take the second bundle, or the second piece of foliage. Lay it flat on the wreath so that the tip of it covers the stems of the last.

Top tip: How much overlap you have will determine how thick your wreath is. Only just overlapping will give you a slightly Georgian elegance. Only just not exactly on top of each other will give bulk. I know which I prefer, but it really is a matter of taste.

Repeat and repeat and repeat. Always going backwards, covering the stems of the last with the tips of the next. Keep the wire quite tight.

Top tip: We all wreath flat on a tabletop and it looks perfect. Then we get to the end and hold it up to admire. The bundles twist, it looks super wonky, and you suddenly realise you can see lots of wire and the moss in the middle. Make sure you hold it up every so often during the making so you can see if you need to wire tighter, overlap more, or alternate how the bundles are facing towards the outside and towards the inside.

When you get to the end, you might need to wriggle a bundle underneath your very first one. This bit is always a bit tricky but its worth taking the time to get right. If it still looks a bit gappy, tie your ribbon over this bit and no one will even know.

Hang with string and tie a ribbon to it, or use the ribbon itself as the hanging point.

Top tip: You've got to the end and held it up. One side is much heavier than the other because you ran out of bundles and so the last half had them spaces further apart. Don't worry. Hold it up (better still hang it on a nail and take a photo, the human eye is so unhelpfully forgiving...) If you turn the wreath so the heavy half is lowest, and the thinnest half uppermost, it will suddenly look intentional and balanced. Hang a ribbon off the mid point of the heavy bit and everyone will think you are a genius.

Finishing up

The hay needs to be dampened in order to provide the foliage with a supply of moisture. You can just dip the base in the sink with an inch or so of water in it but this does get it very wet and I do worry about my elm front door. I tend to wait for rain and leave it out in the front garden, foliage down, for a few hours and I think that is the perfect amount of moisture. (This also works well if your wreath is starting to look a bit limp. It won't rejuvenate a crispy wreath, but it will

improve the life of an evergreen wreath if you regularly give it a bit of a water.)

I have just realised that I have to put my wreath in the front garden to get rained on because my front door is covered with a deep thatch overhang. I suppose if your wreath is exposed to the elements, it's getting moisture anyway.

If you have a genuinely precious door and you are concerned about any possibility of marking at all then then you can line the inside of the hay or moss with some biodegradable plastic. Caddy liners are perfect.

A note on ribbons

The number of wreaths I have transformed from a bit ordinary to glorious is significant. My secret? Ribbon. There are a couple of ways of using it, and none of them include those organza wired things with glitter on the edges. Really thick ribbon (9mm+) is quite difficult to work with and really thin can look a bit stingy. Save the former for putting round the cake & the latter for putting round presents wrapped in brown paper.

Tails. I love tails. Takes seconds and adds so much. Two slightly contrasting ribbons looks good, and go as long as you dare. Cut the ribbon twice as long as you would like the tail. Either put the ribbons around the lowest point of the wreath (or a particular patchy bit that you would like to cover) and tie. Pull the knot round a bit so that it is towards the back and the tails fall from where the wreath touches the door. Cut the ends of the ribbon on a diagonal at very slightly different lengths.

Ribbons to hang. I think this looks really good with the plainer, simple wreaths. Just loop the ribbon round the top and fix the ribbon to your door. These often look best if the ribbon stays flat so it might be worth feeding the ribbon over the top of the door and fixing it onto the inside.



04

CHRISTMAS COLOUR - ONE METHOD, TWO RESULTS

Two silks

I have gone silky for Christmas because, well, it's Christmas, and this is all about opulence.

However, silk is not unproblematic and so, if you are also going silky, then I implore you, check your sources. To be ethical and sustainable, your first option is Botanical Inks, who supply the only UK-made, truly silk-worm respecting silks (they are usually killed in the production process), or you source 'peace silk; (also known as 'ahimsa silk', or you go plant-based imitation, also known as bamboo silk. Now, to be fair, Babs Behan of Botanical Inks was aghast when I suggested bamboo silk and I fear that it is a terribly resource-intensive production process. But it is vegan, so really, one has to pick one's poison.

For ethical silk, any of the options by Botanical Inks will be beautiful. For heavier ribbons or wrapping, the satin is beautiful. If you want something more Silk and Willow-ish, choose the habotai. If you are in the USA, I am truly envious, because you can source from Themazi.

For organic bamboo silk, all weights seems to be glossy and quite heavy, so I recommend Ray Stitch. If you have come this far and are feeling a bit overwhelmed by the whole process, they do sell different colours... For dyeing at home, if you start with the oat coloured option rather than stark white, I find the tones seem lovelier.

Usually, there are two rather different routes because the methods of colouring protein fibres (proper silk) and plant-based fibres (bamboo silk). However, I have made everything super-easy, and if you follow the steps below, you should get some glorious colour, whatever silk you start with.

Two results

WRAPPING SCARVES -

furoshiki, the Japanese tradition of wrapping gifts (and other things) in fabric is an utterly beautiful, as well as a sustainable, tradition to adopt. The practice of wrapping in silk makes it even more lovely. I find heavier fabrics are better for larger objects and bottles, but silk works perfectly for wrapping textiles (yes, everyone should get at least pair of socks for

Christmas), and anything in a small box.

RIBBON -

Ribbon can elevate the most utilitarian of wrapping paper, even a brown paper parcel, to the heights of luxury. Extra points if it is long enough to wear as a necklace, or fine enough to wear as a bracelet, for the evening's festivities, after the King's Speech, and before everyone falls off their chair with drink.

Rather counter-intuitively, one does not dye silk ribbon, one dyes big bits of fabric, and then tears them terribly carefully into strips. I know, the things that no-one ever tells you. Just make sure if you want to end up with ribbons, don't use fabric with any hem or edging.

But enough, pick your end point, and then come along with me.

STEP ONE: GETTING STARTED

For all and any dyeing, there are usually two non-negotiable steps before you even get to the colour stage: scouring (cleaning off any residue and waxes so that the mordants can reach the fibres), and mordanting (creating a fix between fibre and dye).

But this is Christmas, we've all got lists and commitments and parties and champagne to drink. So, as my gift to you, I am making this a one-step prep.

How? We are going to use only substantive dyes. The step that we are skipping is the mordanting, which is the application of a chemical to help the dye 'bite' into the silk.

However, there are some dyes that magically already have enough tannins that they are like a colour and mordant all in one.

These are the ones we'll be using. Take your pick from:

*Black tea, Onion skins
Avocado pits, Coffee, Eucalyptus*

Oh, and before you do anything, weigh whichever fibre you are using and write it down somewhere. I will keep talking about WOF (weight of fibre) so you know how much of various things to use, and it is a bit of a nightmare to do it by eye.

STEP TWO : GETTING EVERYTHING TOGETHER

For scouring, you will need:

- / Scales
- / A big stainless steel pot, one that has retired from culinary life,
- / Some wooden spoons and a set of tongs, ditto
- / Some ecological soap – I use Dr Bonners

For the dyeing, you will need:

- / Dyestuff :
 - For gold, onion skins
 - For pale brown, coffee grounds
 - For a lighter, antique gold, tea
 - For pinks, avocado pits and skins
 - For warm browns, eucalyptus
- / An old aluminium jam pan, different metals give different colours and generally, the more reactive the more interesting.
- / A sieve or some cheesecloth

A safety note, although we will only be doing small bits of fabric, pots of hot water can be surprisingly heavy. Be careful of both your back and spillage. If you are struggling even a tiny bit, let the water cool, empty a couple of litres out with a measuring jug, and try again.

It is not worth pulling a muscle over.

STEP THREE : SCOURING

Scouring means cleaning any dirt, wax, chemical coating etc, off the silk, so that the dye can make contact with the fibre. It is usually done by washing very thoroughly, and in quite a specific way.

I have simply not been brave enough to put proper silk through the washing machine, but I have a new washing machine, and I also have bigger quantities to do than previously. However, the softest, mildest, ‘hand’ wash setting, or take the sensible way out, and actually just hand wash. Use Dr Bonner’s, not a proper detergent.

Then, fill a nice big saucepan with water and add a squirt of Dr Bonners. The fabric should swill around so be generous with the pot and the water. Simmer very gently for at least an hour. If you are doing a small amount and you have a large slow cooker, this might be an option. In these energy saving times, I tend to use a low oven set to about 60 degrees and just bung the saucepan in (it just about fits). You might want to go a little bit hotter if you are using bamboo, cellulose fibres always take a bit more work. Move it around every so often, but be gentle.

[During this hour, you can be starting step four, so read on, and then come back.]

After an hour, take off or out of the heat and leave the silk to cool in the water.

Tip the dirty water away and hand wash. Sometimes, if the water is really dirty, I start the whole process of heating, simmering, and cooling all over again. It is a fine line between damaging the fibre by over-scouring, and making sure you have done the process justice. Remember it is delicate and be respectful.

Once you are satisfied that the silk is scoured and thoroughly rinsed, put it to one side, but do not let it dry out. It's ready for dyeing and if you put dry fabric into a dye pot, it is absorbed very patchily.

STEP FOUR : THE DYE

Yes, the time has finally arrived. The actual fun bit. The general principle is the same for all extraction of colour from plants, and it is essentially the same as making a very stewed cup of tea. An excellent rule of thumb is to remember that, like tea, we are after steeping, not boiling. Boiling is too strong for almost all colours (I except avocado from this, it does need a bit of persuasion) and it won't do the final results any favours. A light touch, always.

Another good rule of thumb is that you should have around the same weight of plant material as you do the weight of fibre (Again, avocado is the exception – aim for twice the weight of pits as fibre). *Follow both of these rules, and joy awaits you.*

Fill a clean pot with water and add the material. Bring to just below a simmer and hold it there. The amount of time it needs to steep will depend on the material but most of the ones we are using are pretty generous and will give colour quite quickly, so let us say simmer for about half an hour, an hour if you have the time and are going for deeper shades. Be cautious with onion skins, the right amount of time and you get warm gold. Leave too long, and you get tango orange.

Leave to cool a little, just so it is easier to strain.

For even colour, remove all of the plant material. Some people like the speckles that come from leaving the silk in with the coffee grounds or the onion skins and that can be lovely, but my experience is that it just makes cleaning the silk at the end a nightmare.

Return the dye bath to the big pot, compost the leftover plant material.

Take your damp scoured silk, and carefully put it in the dye bath. I swear this first minute is worth the last thirty, so do this bit carefully. Try and make sure the silk goes in without folds, crumples or creases and swirl constantly for at least a few minutes. Now bring the whole pot back up to a simmer, or maybe just below a simmer. Do not risk everything boiling at this stage. Yes, I am going to bung the whole pot back in

the bottom oven, but, if you managed to clean out your slow cooker after the scouring process, this will do just as well.

Set an alarm to stir the fabric every fifteen minutes or so, but otherwise leave well alone for an hour.

Take the pot out. You will be tempted to have a look. Be prepared for the fact that it will always look darker in the dye bath. Take the silk out, rinse it carefully, and hang up to dry.

STEP FIVE : FINISHING

For furoshiki wrapping scarves, this is where we end.

For ribbons, use some very sharp scissors to make a cut in the edge of the silk, and very carefully tear into strips of your chosen width.



05

TACTILE TEXTILES AT CHRISTMAS

Wrapping

You know the glitter and metallic foil wrap isn't recyclable don't you? If you get given any, feel free to re-use it. I love the fact that Nigel Slater hasn't bought any wrapping paper for decades because he peels the Sellotape off all the stuff he is given. It was also Nigel Slater that introduced me to furoshiki. Oh yes, a whole rabbit hole of beauty.

The principles of furoshiki are, as you would expect from something originating in Japan, profoundly elegant. A square (and it is always a square, you can do this with a tea towel if you like, but you will have to cut it up) is wrapped and knotted around an object. It needs no tape and no scissors, but maybe a sprig of something at the finish. I am not going to lie, square objects are easier to start with. Books and boxes are an absolute breeze. A bag of lovely coffee at a push. I've never tried wrapping a tennis racquet.

You can use almost any fabric, although avoid

anything stretchy or anything too thick.

I hope this fabric is going to be reused for as long as possible, so it is worth putting in a bit of effort to finding the perfect fabric. Yes, of course I have been natural dyeing mine. It has to be square though, a tea towel won't work unless you cut it to square.

STEP 1. Find a square of fabric that fits the present. If you place your present in the centre with the points of the fabric diagonally top, bottom, left and right, the fabric should fold all the way across with a bit to spare.

STEP 2. Make sure the present is dead centre but pulling all the points of the fabric upwards. Adjust the position of the present so that they meet equally.

STEP 3. First wrap. Fold two of the opposing corners over the present so that they are wrapped snugly around the sides. Tuck under if you need to.

STEP 4. This should leave tails. The next



step may take a few goes to look neat because you have to fold the tails up to the top whilst making sure you tuck in the corners of the fold, a bit like you have to fold paper inwards to form a triangle before you Sellotape the ends on.

STEP 5. Once you have the folds as you want them and the tails at the tip, knot. A reef knot is traditional but I am not sure it actually matters. Adjust the ends so they look neat. Add a gift tag or a festive spring, and there you have it. Now all you need to do is to work out how to ask for it back once the present has been opened.

All too much?

Silk ribbon can add a huge amount to a simply wrapped parcel, particularly if it contains something a little bit special. Or, for the more subtle of those amongst us, twine and something dried always looks lovely. Not always appreciated by children or in-laws, but you will have the satisfaction of creating something exquisite.

Paper dyeing – gift tags

As in the chapter above, this is a two for one tutorial because these instructions are exactly the same for place settings, you just need to

add a hole and some string if they are tags. This works best with quite absorbent paper so cotton rag or similar. You can mordant if you like, it's a simple process involving soya milk, but if you are short of time, you really don't have to.

STEP 1. Make paper dye. A really strong tea, a few onion skins boiled in not a lot of water, or a jar of black scabious just covered with the water out of the kettle. We are aiming for really strong here, much more concentrated than fabric dye so think ten tea bags in less than an inch of water. I keep used teabags in the fridge for this. You have to take the teabag out before you add the milk though, otherwise you have rancid dye.

STEP 2. Optional step, mordanting. Use a baking tray or a bowl to mix a few tablespoons of soya milk with 300ml or so of water. Soak the paper in it for as long as the paper can do without falling apart, and then leave until they are almost dry. If there is a bit of dampness still in the paper, the tea goes on more evenly. Think trying to mop up a spill with a dry cloth.

STEP 3. Dyeing the paper. If you would like only one side coloured, then use a paintbrush to paint the tea onto the paper. I find it easier and I get more of an even effect to put the tea in a little enamel tray and just dip the paper into it. Give it a poke to make sure the paper is submerged, leave for a few

minutes and take it out. You will look at it and think that this has all been a waste of time because the paper has barely changed colour. The trick is to layer the colour; leave the paper to dry off a bit, but not completely (see above) and put it back in the tea. I find three rounds of this gives the best colour. Any more doesn't really add much, but too few doesn't quite give the depth of colour I am after.

STEP 4. Either add string for gift tags, or don't for place settings. A bit of gold leaf, or an edge of gold paint, takes these to a whole other level. There is nothing else to do than to get your best handwriting on. Calligraphy is on my list for 2023.

Paper & ribbon

Brown paper and string. Brown paper and velvet ribbon. You can't go wrong with brown paper generally. If you want to add some botanical touches, a heuchara leaf, a spring of bay, juniper, or rosemary will look absolutely wonderful. There are many dried flowers and grasses which also look great but will not survive the post, or being transported very far. Maybe for your nearest and dearest only.



12 DECEMBER

Clear skies means a frost. The moon hangs like a hammock in the west and Orion lies drunkenly over Pickeridge hill in the east. The globe artichokes are silver with ice and look all the world like a William Morris wallpaper.

13 DECEMBER

The first of three days of leave from work. I start with lunch at the Ethicurean. The most beautiful lunch, the most beautiful garden, with the most wonderful people. It is the taste of an alternative life as much as anything, a life away from the nine to five. Taking the time to appreciate the shape of the apple trees, the seed heads on the plants, the colour of the chards and salad leaves, the stories of the women who spent some precious hours together, the taste of the food.

Even before we went into the walled garden, a sign caught my eye. A shed with boxes and boxes of vegetables. Beetroot and kohlrabi. Garlic tinged with purple, carrots with the soil still on. Bottles of apple and pear juice, pressed from the Barley Wood orchards, I buy as many bottles I can for the wreath workshops. I dream of running a little garden-gate greengrocers from my cottage.

14 DECEMBER

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.

GIFT GUIDE

It is not easy for me to think about embarking on Christmas shopping because I come from a long line of passive-aggressive present givers. That is not the most charitable interpretation; they may just have been clueless. My paternal grandmother only gave presents that were sugar pink, the plusher, the better; the highlight being a Dash tracksuit in 1986. She was either ahead of the trend for loungewear or harboured a desire to be cruel to a young girl with red hair.

One later Christmas, I can remember being given a jewellery box with a ballerina on the top by a first-degree relative. (I vividly recall opening it in the attic of my university house, so I would have been in my early twenties). The gap between who I thought I was and who they thought I was took the wind completely out of my sails. The pain at being so not-known was visceral. I do not still have that box, nor many of the other presents that I have been given over the years. It makes me very sad that those presents, along with many many other people's, are still out

there somewhere, in piles of rubbish, in landfill. Yes, of course I use charity shops, but still there's only so much stuff our planet can produce and then re-absorb when it is discarded and spent.

Bad present buying is not good for the planet and it's not good for us. We give to show love, care and gratitude, so how can it be so stressful for us to do? How can it feel so hard to be left with something that represents an emotional bruise? Stuff flows like silt through our homes; sticking to the edges, collecting in the cupboards. We either have to live with the clutter of someone else's choosing, or we have to wait a respectable period and then eject it back into the ocean of man-made objects in which we float.

But enough of the problems; what of the solutions? Is it possible to achieve what we want to with gift-giving, without all the downsides? With my psychologist hat on, here is what I think...

What are you trying to achieve with the present? What do you think that person needs? Alain de Botton has spoken about how adults tend not to need things, they need emotions. They need to feel understood. Or connection. Or escapism. For those who are exhausted, a little bit of relief. For those stuck in the grind, a bit of luxury. I can't help feeling that a year's subscription is the absolute ultimate in giving a gift of a whole year's worth of happiness, but then I might be biased. (I did add a hamper – just because the tradition of giving things really is a hard one to break.)

Presents that are about what you need *them* to want will always backfire. My husband keeps dropping hints about me starting spin classes again but if an exercise bike arrives on Christmas day, I am not going to react well. My mother bought me advanced driving lessons a few years ago. (I told you she was passive-aggressive.) She rang me once a week for about eighteen months to ask me if I had taken my advanced test yet. I never did.

If this is a bit of an ask, there are ways of giving gifts that don't bind them in to keeping objects forever. Consumable things are the most obvious. Saipua soap has been the most sought-after present I've ever known (now available in the Gather shop). I've heard a rumour that catanies (almonds coated in chocolate fondant) are the absolute last word in confectionery. If I hadn't already

ordered one, I'd be over-joyed if someone presented me with a Piper's Farm cheese box.

Obviously, you get extra brownie points if you make gifts yourself but we are aiming for stress-reduction here. Only attempt this if you genuinely have the time and headspace to do it. If you don't, you'll resent them for not being gushingly grateful enough that you spent a fortune on buying in the ingredients and were sweating into the icing at 2am. And that, people, is exactly what we are trying to avoid.

Candles are the middle ground of this, but if you are going to give someone something to set fire to in their home, make sure it isn't toxic. Or seeds. There is some effort required with seeds but they give a disproportionate amount of joy and I deliberately made them beautiful enough that they look just as lovely as packets on a noticeboard or framed as they would do growing. I do many many sweet peas in December.

If you are sure you know someone, you've spent some time in their home (or long enough on their Instagram page) you will understand their aesthetic, their leisure time, their niggles. Give to one or more of these aspects of them.

Example: I adore slightly asymmetrical, hand-made, matte, sort of brown things.



(You will know this about me if you have ever seen three or more of my photographs.) I'm increasingly obsessed with the idea of hand-dying fabrics with botanical colours. I get really cold feet in bed and I spend a lot of time in wellies. Considering this venn diagram of my life, my absolute perfect present is a pair of hand-dyed socks. Similarly, my absolute favourite Christmas present last year was a gold hand-dyed silk scarf from The Natural Dyeworks. I have worn it in Court, to pubs, in photo shoots, and just day to day wear.

Coming up a close second are any hand-thrown ceramics. You all know Sarah Gee is a favourite but also anything by Ali Herbert, Kara Leigh Ford and Rebecca Proctor. Everything they make are beautiful tactile pieces and I cannot imagine anyone not gasping with joy on finding one of them in their stocking.

Oh, just to drop in, an absolute cert for any gardener. Niwaki tools. I don't say this because I sell them; I sell them because I *adore* them. And Sentei snips and secateurs, as well as Kenzans, are always 25% off in my shop.

Books. Is there such a thing as too many books? This year has marked the publication of some beautiful books: Milli Proust's *From Seed to Bloom*, Sarah Langford's *Rooted*. I still adore James Rebanks' book, *English Pastoral*. Lots lots more reviews &

recommendations in the Boxing Day chapter below.

I am deliberately suggesting books for reading rather than textbooks; I want to imagine the recipient with their feet up, after the King's Speech, glass of wine in hand, happily disappearing off to another, horticultural world. Yes, I wrote a book for reading too. Can I suggest a signed copy from my website...?

Starting to feel overwhelmed? Stop. Overwhelm and too much choice equals anxiety and present-buying panic. If you would like someone else to curate your choice, visit someone whose taste you trust, and then pick from a finite number of options. Obviously, Midgley Green are top of the list for this. Find your local shops supporting makers and support them. It will be significantly less stressful than trying to choose from the endlessly flashing, dopamine chasing, popping up, infinite magic mirror of the internet. (If you are remote and do not have a local high street, start with *The Future Kept*.)

Economic trades are about one human being handing over money to another human being for something of equal value. Part of that trade is amplified if you get to talk to that human being, that you see them and hear them. The relationship between the giver and the receiver is not the only connection

in the madness of Christmas; you are in a relationship with the maker and seller of that present too. Whether you like it or not. Be sure that you are proud of your role in that. Using your hard-earned money to prop up exploitative infrastructures and inhumane working practices... ok ok, back to the fun stuff...

If you are not already a member of Gather, a year's subscription would be just the thing to drop into conversation that you would like, or to give to a flower-loving friend. If you know they would love it, it comes with an option of a gift hamper which is, though I say it myself, gorgeous and entirely plastic-free.

I am lit up by learning, so we naturally arrive at the gift of knowledge. Online courses maybe. Real life courses can be wonderful; the River Cottage bread course is known to be excellent, but not for the inflexible or the time-poor. And remember, if it puts them under pressure to do something, organise tricky baby-sitting and is an added drain on their resources and/or is an implied criticism, that's unkind.

A few people have sent me messages about how to manage unkindness as expressed through the medium of Christmas presents. Material objects can be such a powerful way to express favouritism in families; who is on the up, who on the slide, who cares, who considers, and who, visibly, does not. My

only answer is that you cannot control what anyone else does, and you have no more right to do so than they have to control you. You do not have any responsibility for the actions of anyone else, only your own.

If it is misjudged but the intention was kind, then it is the thought that counts. Smile, be grateful, plan how to move it on responsibly and sensitively. If it is careless, then have the conversation about how you are giving to charity next year and don't expect any presents for the foreseeable.

If it is malicious, know that you can get to an age when you have to be your own best parent. That means making sure you go to bed on time, that you eat regularly, that you always have clean pants when you need them, and it means doing your own stocking. If there is no-one amongst your friends or family that you can truly rely on to get it right enough, put aside ten pounds out of your budget and buy yourself what you really want.

Can I suggest that the best stocking filler, nay the best gift ever, is a bundle of seeds? Truly giving the gift of future beauty. Give them to yourself, or give them to another. Either way, we increase the sum total of beauty in the world.

Picture below by Ali Herbert



23 DECEMBER

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The box of baubles is down from the attic. The boot room is stacked with branches and bracken. The whole lane of old man's beard, upon which I had my beady eye, disappeared in ten minutes when the tractor and hedge trimmer passed along the track behind the church.

24 DECEMBER

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I think the world is divided into those who love Christmas Day and those who prefer Christmas Eve, although if my recent Instagram post has anything to do with it, the winter solstice seems to hold more meaning and more wonder than either. This Christmas Eve was a cracker though; endless mulled cider, carols at King's, cheese and crackers, all lit by candles and firelight.

25 DECEMBER

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A workaday sort of Christmas Day, with my husband working at hospital all day and me on call. But a day with bread sauce and chestnut stuffing is never a bad one in my book, and there were exquisite almond biscuits in the post, and elderberry syrup with tonic served in champagne saucers, and the scent of clementine peel on the fire.



Treasure the traditions.

Ritual is more important to *Homo sapiens* than you can ever imagine possible.

Some days, it is all that holds us together.

Christmas Day

You will have your own traditions for Christmas Day.

A morning walk up to Otterford for us. A particular walk that involves a stile that cannot be managed by any of the dogs and so means lifting them all over and everyone getting covered in mud. A flask of tea and a mince pie, maybe a River Cottage recipe Pfeffernusse (jam inside rather than marzipan).

Planning to go to the exquisitely bucolic carol and mince pie service in a church hidden in the woods on the top of the Blackdowns, and then not going. Every meal starts with 'canapes' (crackers with cheese and chutney on my best olive board) and I eat smoked salmon for every breakfast.

For a soundtrack, can I suggest Nigel Slater's Christmas Chronicles? Or my chat with Becca of The Garden Gate Flower Company?

Dressing the table

Now is the time for your best linen, all the glassware, and candles galore. If you have anything at all that you are saving for best and you don't get it out today, then you might as well send it to a charity shop right now, you will never use it.

My top tip for dressing a table is that you should focus as much of your energy on things that you will actually use. By this I mean, plates, glasses, crockery and cutlery.

I sometimes see styled shoots with glorious garlands of greenery and all I can think is, where on earth are they going to put the roast potatoes? Even if there are only a few of you, you will run out of table space quicker than you think.

And so the decoration should focus on the things that you will be using. A twig of larch on the plate. A beautiful piece of ribbon around the knives and forks. A length of ivy, stiffened with fine wire, around the linen napkin. A few stems of dried grasses in a bud vase maybe, but no more.



RECIPES

I am not alone in associating Christmas with the best of the year's food and drink. I mean, asparagus season is a highlight, and I barely stopped banging on about quince between August and November. (I put some in the freezer for the Boxing Day breakfast, so it doesn't even stop there.) But Christmas is something else.

It might seem like festive blasphemy, but I go to Nigel Slater's Christmas Chronicles for entertainment, and Anna Jones for the practicalities. Being a vegetarian, she does a great line in making the sides the stars, and doing right by the kitchen garden produce, which is a sure way to my heart.

I will be making her squash, winter herb & crispy butter bean pie on both Christmas Eve

and New Year's Day. If you have never crisped a butterbean, I very much recommend that you do so as soon as is humanly possible. A roasting tray of vegetable, artichoke hearts, and half a tin of butterbeans has become a lunchtime staple this year.

Maybe practicalities is too prosaic a word for Anna Jones; she is truly inspirational. And the ultimate in reliable, for those of us who are a certain age, is Delia Smith.

I do think mincemeat needs a reliable recipe; too many are dry, or claggy. Delia's is luxurious and gloriously decadent.

In essence, Christmas.

Mincemeat

INGREDIENTS

1 lb (450 g) Bramley apples, cored and chopped small (no need to peel them)
 2 oz (50 g) whole almonds, cut into slivers
 4 level teaspoons mixed ground spice
 ½ level teaspoon ground cinnamon
 ¼ level teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
 6 tablespoons brandy
 8 oz (225 g) shredded suet
 12 oz (350 g) raisins
 8 oz (225 g) sultanas
 8 oz (225 g) currants
 8 oz (225 g) whole mixed candied peel, finely chopped
 12 oz (350 g) soft dark brown sugar
 grated zest and juice 2 oranges
 grated zest and juice 2 lemons

EQUIPMENT

You will also need 6 x 1lb (350ml) preserving jars and 6 waxed discs.

VARIATIONS, if you wish:

Use half almonds, half pecans. Slip in a little stem ginger in syrup. Vegetarian suet works just as well. Ditto whiskey, just use what you have at the back of the cupboard. Not the time for the single malt. Calvados at a push. If you don't have brown sugar, use white, minus a tablespoon, and then substitute that for black treacle.

METHOD

All you do is combine all the ingredients, except for the brandy, in a large mixing bowl, stirring them and mixing them together very thoroughly indeed.

Then cover the bowl with a clean cloth and leave the mixture in a cool place overnight or for 12 hours, so the flavours have a chance to mingle and develop. After that pre-heat the oven to 120C/gas mark ¼. Cover the bowl loosely with foil and place it in the oven for 3 hours, then remove the bowl from the oven and don't worry about the appearance of the mincemeat, which will look positively swimming in fat. This is how it should look.

As it cools, stir it from time to time; the fat will coagulate and, instead of it being in tiny shreds, it will encase all the other ingredients.

When the mincemeat is quite cold, stir in the brandy. Pack in sterilised jars (see below). When filled, cover with waxed discs and seal.

It will keep in a cool, dark cupboard indefinitely, (I have kept it for up to 3 years), but I think it is best eaten within a year of making.

When it comes to making the pies, everyone's pastry preferences are so different, I wouldn't be so bold as to make a recommendation for it. Indeed, you might be considering buying it, and who am I to judge?

But what I will say is keeping it cold matters more than you could ever imagine possible. An Everhot or an Aga will make your kitchen permanently warm, so I have been known to take it to the potting shed at the end of the garden to roll it out.

Also, it must not be rolled out when you are stressed. I swear that pastry is like the horse; they can smell fear. Be bold, but cool.

Oh ok, you've twisted my arm. My go to pastry recipe is Felicity Cloake. Positively fool proof.

I promised you a mulled cider recipe too. I made this for one of my favourite wreathing workshops ever, and I think that the creativity in the room, already running hot, positively exploded when mixed with a couple of glasses of this, chased with a tot of homemade sloe gin.

Mulled Cider

Serves 20.

Zest and juice of 2 oranges, peeled carefully in wide strips, with a potato peeler to leave as much of the white pith behind as possible
3 clementines, peeled
2 cinnamon sticks
6 cloves
2 star anise
2 cardamom pods, lightly crushed with the flat of a large knife
2 vanilla pods, split lengthways
50g stem ginger in syrup, finely chopped
4 litres good, dry cider (I favour Dunkertons which is from Herefordshire, but Sheppys is also good and much more local)
500g dark brown sugar, or less, to taste

In a heavy-based frying pan over a very low heat, toast the orange peel, clementine peel (keep the fruit for later), cinnamon, cloves, star anise, cardamom, and vanilla for around 10 minutes, constantly moving everything around in the pan so nothing can catch and burn.

Once the aromas of the spices start to fill the air, tip into a bowl with the chopped stem ginger, and set aside.

Pour the cider into a large saucepan for which you have a lid. Cut up the clementine flesh and add to the cider with the orange juice and the reserved spice mix.

Warm over a low heat (it simply must not boil, do not leave it and go and do something else) and gradually stir in the sugar, tasting as you go.

You may decide you don't need all of it, depending on how much of a sweet tooth you have. My husband and I differ on this, so I have been known to add a teaspoon full of sugar to my glass and leave the cider in the pan a little drier. Yes, exactly like a cup of tea.

Leave the mulled cider on the lowest possible heat for your guests to ladle directly into mugs, but make sure you and they keep the pan covered, or the alcohol will boil off and you'll be left with nothing but hot spiced apple juice.

And where's the fun in that?

07

BOXING DAY

Sow sweet peas

The reason I do sweet peas for Christmas is because you really can sow them on Boxing Day. If you have over-indulged, then a few hours with your hands in soil are likely to be just the thing. A full guide on how to grow the best sweet peas over in Gather.

Prune apple trees

Now is the time for doing some winter pruning. I find it a light and gentle task which has an unexpected effect on the whole feel of a garden. A little more structure and tidiness in the right places, and everything is transformed.

Read books

I have a lot of books. Books I have started and not finished. Books I haven't yet opened. It is never through lack of interest, but a lack of time. Once a walk has been done, and the last of the bread sauce has been eaten cold out of the fridge, there is nothing to be done but settle down with a book.

I am starting with *The Morville Hours* by Katherine Swift because someone else raved about it years ago and so I bought both it and *The Morville Years*, and then read neither.

However, I am also buying some in preparation for the next few (dark) months. Rachel Atkinson stocks some wonderful books on her website, *Daughter of a Shepherd*, and has shared some recommendations:

FOUR HEDGES by Clare Leighton is a beautifully illustrated book about the garden she created in the Chiltern Hills.

THE LOST ORCHARD by Raymond Blanc is his magnificent love letter to British and French fruit trees complete with recipes.

THE TREE by John Fowles is an absolute classic.

IN THE GARDEN: ESSAYS ON NATURE & GROWING, an anthology published by Daunt Books.



26 DECEMBER

A day of mist and then searingly blue skies. As we walk, the mist rolls down the valley and come across our path like a glacier. There is a chill as it passes over me, like a Harry Potter ghost.

30 DECEMBER

Misty day. There are foxgloves seedlings everywhere. I grow white ones, the furry crushed strawberry *Digitalis mertonensis* (my first home was in Merton Park and I feel an affinity), and the chocolate ones. I have no idea what colour the seedlings will come up. Anything but pink I hope. I have allocated a shady part of the kitchen garden to biennials and I transplant the foxgloves in between the honesty and the sweet rocket. Some go in the huge metal trough in the courtyard, in between box and a climbing hydrangea, to be framed by the back door when seen from the house.

31 DECEMBER

We celebrate the turn of the year, the decade, by walking the Herepath. A 14 mile trail that heads up into the hills, around woodland and ancient landscapes, before dropping down into the vale at Thurlbear. Even the setters are slowing down by the end, but it is a cleansing way of marking both time but also a relationship with the Somerset landscape that deepens month by month, year by year.

