

GATHER .
DEEPEST WINTER



GATHER · WINTER

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.

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PREFACE

Hibernation is a state of minimal activity and metabolic depression that occurs in winter. What this means is, that we slow down to survive.

So this journal is all about slowing down.

Wintering.

In the spring, the sap will rise and the energy will be thick and strong in the air. But that time is not now. Now is the time for heeding the message of the season, and being still.

Still, safe, warm.

Safety is one of the most fundamental of all human needs. Now is the time to create safety and comfort in your spaces.

And this is your guide to a blissful, nurturing hibernation.



JANUARY

The year has turned

*Live in the moment, with an eye
on the future.*

January is a tricky month.

*There is nothing in nature that
blooms all year long. Don't expect
yourself to, either. Put your feet
up. Light the fire.*

1 JANUARY

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A gentle sort of newsletter this week. Early January is not the sort of time for rushing about or leaping into action. Just observing and enjoying, keeping warm, and staying safe.

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3 JANUARY

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Hellebores. The first ones are always the white ones (*H. niger*) and it seems so cruel to have them emerge so early when they are the most vulnerable to being marked by the elements. Every year at this time, I have to resist buying more slate varieties. The darkest of dark. Infinitely more dramatic.

4 JANUARY

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My Instagram feed is full of white photographs. Some people have snow, and those who don't have snow have hoar frost. Those who don't have hoar frost have sparkling frost or freezing fog. Nothing so dramatic here although I had to scrape ice from the inside of my car windscreen. The girls cuddle under Welsh blankets and I am glad I never got round to clipping more of the spaniel than his ears.

01

JANUARY BLUES

I do not want you to lose trust in me, I truly don't. My writing is often a matter of treading a fine line between what is right and what is true. The truth is that the little paper bags of the Isle of Wight Garlic Farm cloves that I bought for autumn planting have been sitting in a box down the back of the sofa since I don't know when.

I think I may have told you that I planted them when I put my tulips in.

This was in the spirit of being helpful about what you should be doing, but it wasn't quite what I was doing. And so, between the showers and in the moments of sunshine, I get my garlic in today. I tell you what though, an

hour or so with a hoe, and the Kitchen Garden is utterly transformed. There is truly nothing like a bit of weeding to make you feel like life might not be totally overwhelming after all.

"Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it."

- *Mary Oliver*

I've been thinking a lot about the next year of Gather. I have been thinking about where I want to go, what you might want (always a harder question, even for a professional mind-reader like me), and what on earth next year

might bring to scupper all the well laid plans anyway.

The Mary Oliver quote answers all my questions. I want to pay attention.

To notice the first hellebore. To stand by the stream and gaze up at the bursting willow buds and the petroleum purple of alder catkins. To notice the cool of the air when the sun goes down. To truly see the fruits of my labours.

I want to stop putting off the magical moments and saving things for best. I want to walk for miles in comfy socks and I want to come home to cold champagne and a warm fire. I want to sit and write in a way that not only shares the beauty and soul of this little place with you, but that makes me pay attention more.

I want to take photographs of seeds and blossom and ladybirds. Films of flowers. For me and for you, an exhortation to say - stop - look. Be astonished. For this world, even in its

exquisite ordinariness, is astonishing. 2023 may have been the year that we realised that peace is fragile.

2024 will be the year I will take the next steps towards organic status, the year I take a photograph a day of the field from the same spot to document how she ages over the season, the year I set a feeling goal, rather than a doing goal. I want to feel joyful groundedness, to feel the satisfaction of dirt beneath my fingernails and the ache of honest work, to feel the connection of intention and action when a photograph turns out perfectly or the words flow.

I am going to light the best candles and wear my favourite perfume every single day. I am going to cut the most beautiful roses and put them by my bed. I am also going to attempt to hand dye my bed linen with walnut husks but that is entirely another story...

I am going to be astonished in this coming magical year, and I will tell you about it.



14 JANUARY

The frost gives way to fog. It falls and rises but at times it is so thick I stare at the sun, sitting like a disc, like a full moon. The ground is too hard to work so I count the flowers still out. Bells of Ireland and a stray white corncockle. White & blue borage. A white scabious that has been flowering since July. The odd rose. In the matrix planting, *erigeron annuus* is in full song although the plants have grown so well that they lay on the ground, splayed under the weight of their stems. I tidy and cut back without enthusiasm, mindful that the self-sowing of the plants is the key to the success of this year's growth. I know I will be weeding out *atriplex* all Spring; it adores my field and attempts to colonise thuggishly.

15 JANUARY

The hellebores are frozen. I know not to worry, they will perk up again, but it is a sad sight. An almost perfect circle of stem with the most exquisite flower touching the cold soil. Their reappearance every year is a source of much joy (mostly because I'm not sure they do brilliantly where they are and I do have to keep restocking them) and I feel like we have been pulled back into winter, just when we had touched spring. The snowdrops on the other hand, look absolutely fine.

02

HOW TO: SOW 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 in the darkest days of late winter makes them all the more special.

If you are thoroughly over the gloom and dreaming of spring (and I know I am), 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.

My seed envelopes contain at least ten seeds, but usually slightly more. I count by eye and so it is always easier to just be generous. Unless you are a professional flower farmer, this is

a lot of sweet peas, you will get a lot of flowers and need a lot of room. Even I only grow three or four of each variety.

I suggest doing a few of each colour in October, maybe a few more at Christmas, and then reviewing in the spring. It is good to have spares in case of mice or the inevitable germination difficulty and staggering sowing means you get a much longer flowering period than if you sowed everything at once.

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.

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

PREPARE THE GROUND:

Fill your pots/root-trainers 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.

SOW

Put one sweet pea seed half a centimetre into the top of the compost. Sprinkle a little more compost over it, just for luck.

WATER

Water very gently but 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 quite 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.

If the sweet pea floats to the top of the compost in the watering process, just push it back underneath the surface. It really does need to be covered.

GERMINATION

The mantra to remember for most seeds, but particularly sweet peas, is warm and dark for germination, cool and light for growing on. Around 10-15 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.

One of the most important reasons for doing this indoors is that (hopefully) you don't have mice inside the house and mice love sweet pea seeds. They will generally ignore plants so once they are up and growing, they are fine.

Keep them moist but not wet. Once the shoots are up and through, get them out in the cold. If you molly coddle them, you get weak, leggy plants.

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.

Plant seedlings out after the last frost, roughly 8 inches apart, against a support, trellis or netting. Tie them in to get them started. We'll talk a lot more about this in Gather in March/April.

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A few things I am shaking up this year, having learned from a few mistakes, having seemingly bred a population explosion of slugs, and having recently read Roger Parson's seminal tome on sweet peas. I am doing things a little differently this time round.

I AM USING ROOT TRAINERS

Of course, I try and avoid plastic wherever I can. I do manage to save up enough loo roll inners to sow almost enough sweet peas for the field, but I did an inadvertent side by side trial last year (I'd run out of cardboard options and someone gifted me some beautiful root trainers) and the ones in plastic looked so much happier, so much stronger, and just generally had a much better start in life. As with all plastics, store clean and out of direct sunlight, buy quality, and you should be able to reuse and reuse.

I have two size options because the ones gifted are in fact for taking tree cuttings. I think they will be brilliant for the long period of growth from October to March (when I plant out into the ground) although Mr Parson says, rather cuttingly, that these larger ones are 'simply a waste of growing medium'.

I AM COVERING THEM

I banged on about the mantra 'start warm, grow cold' last year until everyone must have been utterly sick of it. But sweet peas care more than most about this because the cold is absolutely key to get the roots going, and also to 'stop' the main shoot and encourage branching. You won't see much going on at the top, but the eventual health of the plant will depend hugely on the network of roots that you get going in the winter. A sheltered corner in most gardens (they are happy enough down to -5) is perfect. However, my sheltered corners are full of great big fat slugs and if I lose one more precious living thing to the teeth of a mollusc, I will be sorely tempted to turf over the field and take up some other all-consuming activity entirely. The root trainers come with plastic lids. I will be using them. I will have to take the risk that they will keep the plants a bit warm.

I WILL BE SOWING THE SPLIT ONES

When I buy in sweet peas, they always add a bit extra if there is a high proportion of split ones. I rarely have any split in my home-produced seed, and when I pack packets on for you, I tend to pick them out, because I assumed they were just dud. However, Mr Parson says that these are fine,

they just are a little more prone to damping off. I don't get much of that (the key is to water once, very thoroughly and then not drown them after that).

I AM NOT WATERING WITH RAINWATER

There are so many logical reasons why watering with tap water should be a terrible idea. Everything about plant health and growth can be understood from the perspective of the microbiome, a sensitive and beautiful balance of fungi and bacteria, all working in harmony to boost a plant into life. Tap water contains chlorine, because having mains water full of interesting and enthusiastic bacteria doesn't work for human beings; we'd all get cholera. It stands to reason that watering plants with chlorinated water will kill off all the important life forms.

So this time last year, I collected rain water in buckets and trays. Thatched cottages don't have gutters, but they do have hips and valleys so there is always one point where the water pours off. I will, of course, continue to harvest this for general watering (not that I do much of that, only containers really) but I think it led to lots of damping off last year. I was disproportionately upset by this; I thought I'd done the right

and wholesome thing, and it didn't entirely go to plan.

I AM TRYING CUTTINGS

I played with this a little bit last year, with mixed results. However, Mr P says that sweet peas not 'stopping' (sending out side shoots rather than one big stem) is caused by being too warm over winter, and these ones will need pinching out. What you pinch out is one perfect leader stem with lots of potential for being a plant of its own. I have absolute buckets of seeds for most of my favourite sweet peas that I am going to grow on for the Gather shop next year, but there are two in short supply (Indigo King and Suzy Z). I will sow every single seed I have, and then try cuttings in March to try and double to number of plants I can use for seed. Suzy Z was one of my favourites this year, but I grew it in the kitchen garden, whose soil is less well suited to sweet peas, and it grew limp and was covered in aphids. Luckily, I have just enough to start again.

This might be the moment to announce that I think the seed shop is going to be more sweet pea next year than anything else. I have just adored growing them and saving the seed this year, and I think I might have found my flower seed niche.



26 JANUARY

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Very very gently preparing for the season ahead as we come into the last week of January. Not so much in the kitchen garden or the field so as not to disturb hibernating wildlife, but moving things round in the greenhouse. Watering some of the winter leaves in pots. Laying out the module trays. Counting the bags of compost. PG Wodehouse on the radio and hot chocolate in a mug.

27 JANUARY

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To celebrate the end of the week, candles on the supper table and branches of the white quince. The drawback of Japanese quince is that its habit is unruly and having it in an oversized jug on the table means you risk taking an eye out, or a piece of blossom fall in your glass of wine. I consider it to be worth it, but I am biased, so I suggest checking with your dining companion first.

28 JANUARY

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I am reminded now more than ever of how the seasons do not shift in every sense all at once. Each day is longer now and the light is thinner, paler and bluer in the day. The air is cold though, even colder than December. It is the sound that has changed though.

This morning I stand in the kitchen with the radio off and hear the unfamiliar songs of the birds. They have not arrived gradually, but seemingly all at once. This morning I stand by the cooker and listen to the day start. The field, the hill, the sky and the kitchen garden are shades and shadows of the deepest, most intense, blue. Indigo.

By lunchtime, the storm has arrived and the road is flooded again. The water is off because of storm damage.



JOBS FOR
JANUARY:

I confess, I am writing this in my study, looking over the garden. I am not in the garden. Although I am utterly delighted that the rain has finally stopped, it is bitterly cold. Too cold for me, and fingers and toes crossed too cold for the slugs. I do find a good deep frost so incredibly cleansing.

I do have a day in the diary for gardening tomorrow. Thursday is my day for doing all the seasonal jobs together - at this time of year, I find it so much easier to dedicate a whole day to wrapping up and then getting muddy. Tomorrow is a biodynamic fruit day, which is perfect, because I was very much hoping to move some apple trees, and take some hardwood cuttings of a pink currant that has been looking quite unhappy for a while.

However, being an inveterate anthophile (a flower lover, and yes, I do wish I'd known that word before I decided to call Gather Gather) I have my eye on Sunday. One long flower day from late dawn to early dusk.

Some of these jobs might need to wait

until the ground has thawed a bit, but have a look at what the weather is doing where you are, and see whether you can get a spade into the soil, and make your own decision about how to fit these jobs into the rest of this darkest month.

BARE ROOTEDS

Plant bare-root roses, shrubs, hedging & trees.

Bare root plants are plants dug up from the nursery field when they are dormant in the winter, and sent out in the post to you just as they are. No pots, no soil, just plants. Lots of advantages to this, including the lightness of packaging and posting.

Bare root plants take really well when they are put into the ground. Think about when you put a potted plant into a hole; there is a boundary between old and new, between the hole and the compost. Roots can hit this and turn back (especially if you have clay), water can sit in the hole, the general shock of putting a mollycoddled, potted plant into the harsh realities of my field can do for it before spring. Bare root plants are

tough. Like really tough. And they are cheaper too. All the benefits.

I am adding lime espaliers to the front wall of Malus Farm and I'll be honest, I am not sure when I am going to be able to plant them as the wall itself might need to be completely rebuilt, but I know that I am better off ordering them now, in bare root season, and then growing them on in pots. Dormant twiggy trees sold bare root are a fraction of a price of sharp green plants in full leaf.

In addition to lime trees, I am also wondering about rejuvenating my rose collection. Many of my plants are over ten years old now and they've been moved a few times. My experience is that climbers last forever, but the more precious hybrid teas do exhaust themselves.

This is also my excuse to finally get hold of a 'Dannahue'. It was the hit of the David Austin stand at Chelsea and I have it on good, if secret, authority, that this is a replacement for the much lamented 'Jude the Obscure'. I am going to buy mine now because

I know they have been very popular and I don't want to go up to the wire (season ends in April) and find that I've missed out. However, if you get the DA catalogue, they do tend to start throwing around discount codes at the end of March. If I get one, I'll share it with you.

Recommended sources for bare rooted plants:

David Austin for roses always. Say what you like about me, but once my heart is given, I am faithful. Chris Bowers & Ken Muir for fruit trees, or Pennard if you can get hold of them. Look out for open days or them being at shows and events. Ashridge Trees for hedging and native trees. They also do apples and other fruit trees.

CUTTINGS

I spent a lot of money on shrubs last year, mostly encouraged/led astray by Rachel of Green & Gorgeous and her beautiful book.

If the weather warms up towards the end of next week, I will be doing absolutely tonnes of cuttings.

Luckily, I have written a whole blog post about that for Gather already, so all I have to do this week is to buy some multi-purpose peat free compost and check that I still have some grit.

HELLEBORES

If you have hellebores already, go and have a look at them. They might surprise you about how far along they are. An early white Christmas rose caught me completely by surprise by being fully in flower on New Year's Day.

My bigger hellebores are showing signs of having a bumper year - again. They are planted around the back of the greenhouse and I think it casts just the right amount of shade. Now is the time to cut the foliage right back. If any of it has even the slightest amount of black on it, burn or send to the council waste, do not compost at home. Leaf spot disease is a terrible problem for hellebores but a little goes a long way in keeping it in check.

if you don't have hellebores or, like me, you don't have enough, now is the time to shop. Not so much because they like being planted in flower (as

snowdrops do) but because hellebores are so subtle in their markings and colour tones that it is so much better to buy them in flower, where you can see them with your own eyes. I have tried for years to do justice to a slate hellebore with a camera and have yet to manage it.

Most UK garden centres will have Harvington hellebores, but do a bit of googling and asking around to see if there are any specialist nurseries around you that might have some interesting varieties. Hellebores are notoriously promiscuous and they create new forms quite happily.

I don't want to gloat, but I am thrilled to find that my new piece of garden has just two flowers in it, and one of them is *Helleborus foetidus*. The other is rose of Sharon (*Hypericum*), that stalwart of supermarket car parks. You can't win them all.

SNOWDROPS

Now is the time to seek out your closest snowdrop colony and, if they are associated with a nursery, get your hands on some to plant.

I have expressed my sadness that East Lambrook may never open again, but I am lucky enough to have Broadleigh Gardens on my doorstep too, which are also snowdrop aficionados.

Snowdrops are unique (if you know of another one, tell me) in that they are planted in flower. Something to do with how much they don't like drying out.

So now is your moment to seek them out, admire them, succumb to buying far more than you intended and plant them. Then you will forget about them until next January and give thanks that your past self gave you such a gift.

PRUNING ROSES

If you have roses, and you haven't pruned them already, now is the time. This recent cold weather has done me a favour. My roses often have a flower or two on them all the way through the winter and, although my secateurs itch, I can't bring myself to cut them right back.

However, two hard frosts and they are in tatters. I am going in. If you have a

waxed jacket, put it on. I always start in a thick, winter woolly jumper and spend the first twenty minutes cursing and unhooking myself.

I remember a trial at Wisley where they compared a bed of roses pruned carefully and intricately by a highly skilled horticulturalist, and one that they ran a hedge-trimmer over. They fared pretty much the same. However, where's the satisfaction in that?

Other jobs: Prune apple and pear trees. Move any established plants in the wrong place. Order dahlias now, before the best ones are sold out.

Oh and sow those sweet peas.



FEBRUARY

Short but sweet

*The turning of the winter. It still
stretches out in front of us, long
and dark, but the end is in sight.*

*And the mornings are lighter,
even if they are still frosty.*

*“While it is february
one can taste the full
joys of anticipation.
Spring stands at the
gate with her finger on
the latch.”*

- Patience Strong



1 FEBRUARY

Sun. Blue skies. A full day in the field. I am a terrible flower farmer because I lack the capacity to be ruthless. I make some progress them come across a patch of the most perfect ravenswing seedlings, their first leaves a bruised purple, the colour of damsons. I love the way they mix with foxgloves and the first peonies, they remind me of Chelsea and style and glamour.

I weed round them, even though I know they are in the wrong place. Some poppies have self sown underneath the amelanchier, so I weed round them too. I look at the nigella seedlings and think how well they are doing in their self-sown spots, right where I was going to put my grasses collection. There is a puddle of aquilegia in the asparagus bed. I cannot bring myself to move them. I leave the field and go into the house garden. I weed the oxalis out of the rose bed, underplanted as it is with bracken-orange pheasants tail grass. Not even I can feel sorry for oxalis.

2 FEBRUARY

Candlemas. Shaking awake. Coming alive. Such a tension between getting on and getting ahead of the season. I feel a bit overwhelmed by the tasks and decide to make the most difference with the least effort. The bit of the garden seen the most is the courtyard outside the kitchen window. I cover the trestle table with gritted pots of muscari, a trough of crocuses, even a pot of white parrot tulips. Not much is showing through yet, but even looking at the order make it feel like the season is where it should be. There is even a box of salad leaves kept in easy reach.

The start of the week was quiet. Nothing happened. But Thursday? Thursday everything happened.

6 FEBRUARY

The smell. Did you smell it? As I went down the path through the kitchen garden to the field, it washed through me.

Spring.

You can smell the earth warming up and the plants coming to life. This year's planting of tulips are up through the gravel (the old tulips have been up and green for weeks) and the pots of muscari neglectum are pushing up red tinged leaves.

Then I heard it. The sound of the birds coming from the woods across the valley was as full as an aviary at the zoo. A solid chorus of sound.

Then I saw that the family of birds had moved back into the thatch overhang. I am not brilliant at bird recognition and these ones move very fast. There is a built nest that I think might be from housemartins, but the first occupants are just living inside the layers of straw. The squirrels wake up in the straw-lined attic and spend the night charging up and down in scampering relay races.

03

IMBOLC

I had a dreadful January. I still can't put my finger on quite why, I just know that I felt ungrounded, jittery and, paradoxically, absolutely exhausted.

Every evening, I checked the clock because it felt like bedtime, and was astonished to find it was only half past seven. Some nights I fought it and sat up in the darkness, even the fire not quite warming my bones. Some nights, I just went to bed and the girls proved my theory that they can sleep for twelve hours straight and not tire of rest.

As February dawns, I am soothed by a wide blue sky. The days still feel chillier than they should, but I am reassured by flashes of warmth on

my skin. There is a time in the turn of the seasons where it is warmer outside than in as the thickness of my ancient cottage walls are slow to let go of the winter. The warmth soothes and yet stirs me, and I feel something awakening in my soul.

An awakening. A stirring. Imbolc means 'in the belly of the earth'. It marks the start of the lambing season but also the start of a deeper bringing forth of life. In the seeds buried in the soil, there is movement, not yet visible, for the surface of the soil remains dark and cold. But deeper than the surface, something is awakening.

Or at least, I like to think so. I want to hope so. I need to believe so.

Because turning one's head slightly
and looking at the year through
the Christian calendar, we are at
Candlemas. Half way through winter.

Half way. How utterly depressing.

Yet looking back over the last few
years, I know that we are only just
starting on the climb up the hill
out of the cold weather, that there
is a road yet to go. We have had big
snowfalls in March here and once in
April. The things that are stirring now
are either the hardy, the courageous,
or the foolish. Hellebores that flop
to the ground when frozen and spring
back to life when to sun touches their
stems.

And when the sun is out, I can forget
this. There is a pot in the courtyard
containing a calendula with courage.
I look out of the kitchen window as
I drink my tea and every morning it
opens and every evening it closes. The
light glints off the edges giving it a
luminous quality. When the sun is
out, the dogs run through the grass in
the orchard. When the sun is out, my

spirits soar.

All this talk of stirring and
awakening, you may be tempted to
sow seeds. Stop. Resist the urge. The
weather is fickle and there are cold
nights to come. You know the one you
can?

Sweet peas.

Today (3 February) is a biodynamic
flower day and I am, to the despair of
my husband, filling the kitchen with
pots, compost, cardboard tubes and
labels. And that's before I bring in the
hundreds of precious little envelopes.
Each printed with the name of hope,
the name of beauty.

Juliet, the romantic one. Dusty
Springfield, the wild one. Indigo
King, the harbinger of regal purple.
Piggy Sue, a name so loved and
familiar it could be of my best friend.
Bristol. Cream Eggs. April in Paris.

Erewhon, the name that everyone
recognises but no one quite knows
how to pronounce.

It is just for a few days, I say. Just until they are sprouted. Warm and dark for germination, and then straight out into the cold greenhouse for strong, stocky growth. The fact that these seeds were started in the heart of my home makes me feel even more invested in them. I give them everything they need and, when the time comes, they give and give and give back in blooms.

Starting to think about spring I know, I know. It's early. Lots of people will say you shouldn't even crack open the compost until the soil warms up in April. However, if you are anything like me, your fingers are itching, and the slightest hint of blue sky brings up dreams of beds and beds of blooms, vases of abundance on every windowsill, bouquets for impressing friends and neighbours. I don't really care if later sowings catch up and I am not really getting ahead, I just want to feel like we've started.

This is emotional, not practical.

Two things though, we're talking only the hardy annuals (and perennials), definitely not the tenders. And you will need to be sowing indoors under cover. I have a tiny greenhouse which is worth its weight in gold at this time of year but if you have windowsills, they'll do.

Because my cottage is the middle of a terrace and my windows face east and west, the light isn't great and the short bursts of light lead to leggy and sad seedlings. Use south facing windowsills. If you have a greenhouse and a heat mat, you are sorted.

All of these flowers will have their first sprinkling on a seed tray of compost on 15 February although I will be waiting until the third week in February for my first big sow of the season.

The days immediately before the full moon are a great time to get seeds started. February's is the Snow Moon. Maybe wait for March, the Worm Moon.



20 FEBRUARY

The days have all blurred into one this week. Days of salmon-sharp burning sun-rises and a wolf moon so big and so low in the sky that Hugo tried to chase it out of the field.

Charles Dowding says mid-February is about right to start sowing seeds again because the light is good enough. They will need heat though. I know this is tempting fate and yes, I know we have had heavy snow in mid-March in recent years, but I cannot help thinking there is a little hint of a change in the air. The Japanese quince has both fruit and buds. The catkins are lemon sharp. There have been evenings that I haven't lit the fire. I swear the *Merveille des Quatre Saisons* lettuces are putting on growth. Crocuses have started to appear on the bank of Mill Lane. The first hellebores have appeared.

The hibernation is over. The landscape is beginning to wake.

22 FEBRUARY

The trickle of Spring orders has turned to a flood. Piggy Sue is back up on the website, along with some new varieties of sweet peas. Hugo and I camp out at the kitchen table, parceling up orders, sticking, stamping, wrapping, alternating tea with coffee and occasionally wine.

For a podcast interview, I was asked about scaling. It turns out I am not a proper businessperson after all; I just can't let go. I do everything, and I do it mostly by hand. The seeds are packed with a teaspoon by me, the envelopes printed by me, and sealed by me. I appreciate that it means that this business stays absolutely tiny, but I just cannot let go. And I think I am ok with that.



JOBS FOR
FEBRUARY:

COMPOST

I make incredible compost in the summer months. All that green and an obsession with getting enough woodchip in means that I get great, rich, fast compost. In the winter months, with no weeds and no grass clippings, the heap is a cool one, and a slow one.

This doesn't mean you have just forget about it though; a turn about now will do it the world of good in terms of getting air in and giving you a chance to assess. Too dry, add a little water. Cold, wet, and claggy, add some scrunched up cardboard or shredded paper.

LEAF MOULD

If you put leaf mould into compost bags in the autumn as I did, it is worth sprinkling them with a little water just to keep the decomposition going. If you have mains tap water and no rainwater, leave it to stand for 24 hours (you don't want to kill all your lovely microbes) and use a watering can with a fine rose. You are aiming for even dampness, not soggy patches.

CONSIDERING THE BIRDS

February can have cold days and warm days. In that order, they are not a problem.

Trouble starts when an unseasonably mild spell is followed by a cold snap. We can't control the weather but we can try and give the right support to keep birds going. Food, obviously, but also water. Clean feathers and tip top plumage is required to fight off the cold.

New arrivals, such as winter thrushes, will thrive on windfall fruit so don't clear up too carefully. However, make sure you sweep up spilt peanuts and seeds if they have come out of the feeders. Cleanliness is next to godliness when it comes to this.

Start to plan for the breeding season. In an ideal world, we would ensure that natural habitats would be protected and abundant. Trees, scrubby bushes and unmanicured hedges. However, this is not an ideal world and so putting up artificial (but tailored) nest boxes is the next

best thing. The style of the nest boxes is determined by the habits of the individual birds. The RSPB can give you guidance but my best advice would be to avoid anything too ornamental. Oh, and out it somewhere high up out of reach of cats, and out of direct sunlight.

CHECK YOUR SOIL

If I could give you one bit of advice about growing, it would be to learn how to identify self-sown seedlings. Nature and serendipity are infinitely better gardeners than I am; I am consistently late with my autumn sowing of hardy annuals. I always forget biennials because I'd rather be sunbathing in July. I try and bring the spring sowings on early by growing them under glass but then my watering is patchy and progress is stunted.

In contrast, the patch where the honesty was last year and has now been planted with garlic is thick with the most perfect, unblemished Lunaria seedlings. The peony bed has the most perfect carpet of Phacelia

green manure which I did not plan at all.

I am not recommending you start weeding now. What I mean is going and have a look at it. You may find some treasures. My old squash patch, destined for sweet peas and eating beans, does have sticky burrs in it, but it also is dappled with hairy, light green plants that I know to be poppies. Poppies are tricky to germinate from a packet, but get a few going and you'll have them forever. Poppies hate root disturbance so I won't be moving them anywhere but there are other seedlings that I might just slip a trowel under and move them to where I want them.

FEBRUARY IS YOUR LAST CHANCE FOR MOVING PERENNIALS

Although there are signs of growth at the base of many of the perennials, I know that there is more cold still to come. I have started to cut back and to label which ones I want to move, or move on.

I have tried with Helianthus 'Lemon Queen', I really have, but I just don't like it.

I do lots of just sort of standing around and being a bit overwhelmed by options and choices and wondering what on earth to do. I have been doing this long enough to know that this is just part of the process of redesigning, so I don't panic. It is so easy to try and plan a garden from the kitchen table, but one does really have to go and stand in the middle of it for the real creative work to be done.

FIND YOUR GARDEN'S FROST POCKETS AND COOL SPOTS

It is by no means the last frost date yet, but make the most of the ones we have. If you wake up to one of those bright, sparkly frosty mornings, put your wellies on over your pyjamas, take your phone and learn what it teaches you.

The most obvious effect on melting is where the sun hits first. Take photos every ten minutes or so at the time when the sun is starting to climb in the sky and you will be able to record which get the sun first and which languish in the shade for a little

longer. It isn't just sunshine though. Frost pockets and cool spots are also about the movement of air, exposed places and dips. They aren't always easy to predict from just looking at the landscape, but observing closely how, when and where the thaw travels across your garden will help you no end when it comes to placing plants.

Oh, and where you should put your breakfast bench and your supper table. Unless you are very lucky indeed, these are unlikely to be the same place.

Remember, there are some very tender plants which are not so much damaged by frost, as by the action of a hard frost and a fast thaw. It might feel like the right thing to do to put more tender plants where they catch the first rays of the sun's warmth, but you might need to protect frozen plants from being warmed too quickly, or place them where they can be thawed by the air warming up before the sun hits them.

COPPICING AND SUPPORTS

I have thought more about structures and boundaries than I ever thought possible. With dramatic decisiveness,

the whole hazel hedge along the south side of the field was coppiced to the ground. It involved a chainsaw and a lot of noise but it was disproportionately satisfying. The light flooded in and I was left with a range of shapes and sizes for tunnels, domes, teepees and pea sticks.

You don't have to go to this extreme but I would suggest thinking about it soon.

Firstly because the plants that make the best plant supports (willow, hazel, cornus) are at the perfect time for coppicing or pollarding and they aren't covered in leaves, which also helps.

Secondly, if you wait until the summer when your plants are flopping all over the place and you are reactive rather than proactive, you will have a nightmare of a time trying to wrestle the plants into the supports, or by tying in already flopping plants, you break them at the base.

Thirdly, the softness of the soil. I am a lazy gardener and I find persistence tricky. All of my arches and tunnels have fallen over because I do not give

them enough of a foundation. The taller the structure, the more of the stick has to be below the ground. It is not an easy job to push a thick stick into clay soil, even if you have made a bit of a hole already. But you know what is even harder? Pushing a stick into baked, hard, dry soil after a hot spell at the end of May. Yes, that is the voice of experience talking.

I have left my hazel a year longer than I should have done and many of the stems resemble trunks, rather than the whippy, bendable material that one needs for true hazel domes. One of my guiding life principles is to make a feature out of my failures and so I will be building some rather robust looking structures this year.

START PREPARING THE GREENHOUSE

My greenhouse leaks. Only on one side and only over a particular area but nevertheless, it means that my greenhouse is a little more damp and green than I would like. As I was rummaging around trying to find some loppers yesterday, I found a soggy bag of muscari that somehow got missed in the big bulb plant.

There are pots with dead tomato vines and a stubbornly living fig tree which my mother gave me because it has frustratingly been on the point of expiring for about five years now. There is some Ikea glassware that I know I don't want but my sustainability conscience won't allow me to just discard. There are old cracked labels and more pots than you can comfortably imagine. It needs a sweep out, an old compost bag filled with rubbish and a bucket put under the leak and I will feel ready for anything.

The planting around the greenhouse was quite tall last year and I think this contributed to the damp inside it. Some of the panes have turned slightly green and will need a clean before the seedlings go in. Good light in the early stages of the season is one of the big reasons why a greenhouse trumps a windowsill every time (light coming from above, rather than the side, helps with the growth). I am going to have to get a bucket of hot water and give the whole thing a swab down.

PLAN YOUR FLOWER BEDS

If you are anything like me, you will have been dreaming about summer since last September. Now is the time to start moving from such fantasies and start making it happen. Having a look in your seed tin. What have you got and what do you need?

Not just varieties, but have a look at the season. Is everything you have an early bloomer and you have nothing in September? Is it all flowers and no foliage? Where are the gaps in the borders that irritated you last year that you might need to get ahead of this year?

Top marks if you kept photographic records throughout the season. My planning efforts are greatly enhanced by looking at people's gardens from above. The actual layout and geography of a garden is rarely visible from the ground, even if you can feel it in your bones if it is a bit off.



26 FEBRUARY

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The pattern of warm days and cold nights continue. We wake to a frost, and we lunch outdoors in sunglasses and a light jumper. The germinated seeds leave the kitchen and are pricked out into pots in the greenhouse. I switch the heat mat on, which is a tacit acknowledgement that the kitchen windowsill is not longer adequate to the task, and that seed sowing is about to begin in earnest.

27 FEBRUARY

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I throw open the windows. Everything that can be put out of doors, is put out of doors. Plants, bowls of bulbs, dog beds, woollen blankets. Dogs. I think about cleaning the windows and marvel at the universality of the instinct that is spring cleaning.

28 FEBRUARY

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A Sunday afternoon walk. There are pheasants everywhere all of a sudden. Having been quiet, they seem to be in all the gardens in the village, or running across the lanes. Reliable recall is now present in only two out of three dogs.

I also notice that many of the big trees have lost branches. One big oak between the back field and the manor house has a whole limb down and it looks lopsided, like an apple with a bite taken out. For some trees, it is better news for me.

The best sloes always seem to grow high up, out of easy reach. One tree has broken in half and the very top is now flowering right in front of my eyes, surrounded by sparkling silver pussy willow.

