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November Good Life ~ Brian Crumblehulme

When rain is a let to thy doings abroad.
Set threshers a threshing, to work a good load.'

Thomas Tusser, 1557

What is the difference between a real gardener and a glossy magazine reader? On a cold day when the rain is dripping from the gutters, the real gardener can't wait to get outside.

This winter I'm putting in a new kitchen garden and there is so much to do between the rains. The fence is in and the first trench dug and filled with compost and manure, so last week we ceremoniously planted the first four trees: a dwarf cherry, another fig, and two more apples. Plums and raspberries go in next. This is the season for planting fruit and ornamental trees as long as the ground is drained. One day after a heavy rain the earth on our terrace garden was still light and friable, a perfect time to move roses and plant out the wallflowers I germinated in summer.

The lower garden tends towards gumbo for a few days following rain which is why I use a trench method to allow run-off water to drain away. Speaking of trenches, I had a heated discussion with a friend the other day who impertinently referred to my trench as a ditch! A ditch is kept open for drainage—a trench is for filling in, in this case with compost for fruit trees or next year's sweet peas.

For anyone with a large rhubarb or asparagus bed the next three months are ideal for forcing either for winter use. Select a large dormant crown, clear away any dead leaves and debris, cover with a layer of clean straw or wood chips, and top with a thick mound of fresh manure, preferably of the horse variety. Then cover all this with a tarp to hold in the heat and keep it relatively dry. In four to six weeks you can pick fresh rhubarb and asparagus; plan now for Christmas. After harvesting your crop these roots should be divided and allowed to grow without picking through next year.

Also for fun, if you have some extra gladioli or lily-of-the-valley, these can be carefully lifted and placed in pots with a good quality potting compost and brought into gentle heat in

perhaps a cool room, where they will grow and flower indoors in January.

There is still time on any dry day to sow winter peas and beans, or set out garlic and onion sets. They all require well-drained earth and the latter will need lots of compost and seaweed. Most of my winter salads are now established and growing crazily so I watch for signs of frost. Two or three degrees are okay but lower than that, I make mini-greenhouse shelters with recycled plate glass windows that warm up in the sun and protect from cold, wind and heavy rain.

Some gardeners wait until spring before pruning roses; perhaps it's my impatience but I like doing this job at the year's end, not the beginning. Many roses will still be straggling on with late flowers and if they look okay, then fine. Otherwise this is the opportunity to prune them back into a snow-resistant shape and allow them to rest awhile.

Roses, the result of centuries of breeding, politics, and terms of endearment, are at their best when they are civil which is why they must be pruned, shaped, organized and given a form from which to grow and improvise. Better not to wear gloves. Thorns represent the wild side of the rose, and symbolism aside, a few pricks and scratches incur respect. It's a felt experience not an abstraction.

Pruning shears should fit snugly into the palm of the hand and they should be sharp. I still regret those hacked and torn branches that I chewed off because the steel was dull. Rose pruners come in two styles, the anvil and the parrot beak, the names are descriptive. The anvil is like a miniature chopping block; the blade comes down onto a flat base, and for this you must hold the twig onto the tool. I prefer the parrot beak. At one and the same time it is like a menacing weapon and a delicate extension of your hand. Pet-store owners warn customers to keep their hands away from the parrot's cage, 'that beak can take your finger off', but the same bird can with incredible dexterity gently select and turn a tiny seed with the finesse of a watchmaker.

With these pruners, I can feel my way into the compass of the bush, move or push aside leaves without damage and locate

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just the right twig for shortening. Take out the dead ones first. Some shoots die back in the winter so they will only rot if left. Then clip off any small or minor shoots for they will be too weak to support much growth and will in all probability fall over with the weight of the first flowers. Expert gardeners tell us to open up the centre of the plants and allow air to flow through. I like to imagine the rose is a hand reaching up; it should be open and generous, not closed or with fingers crossed. The spreading branches should point up and out, strong and with a sense of determination as though grasping the sun. A few inches off the top of any small bush is usually sufficient to create a feeling of balance and integrity, unsymmetrically symmetrical, where each bud and shoot is spatially oriented to the others.

Talking to them, cleaning them, feeding them, and listening to them is our way of coming to terms with the wild and the civilized sides of our being. We extend to them in anthropomorphic ways for that is the only way we know; and with a little sensitivity we can also be receptive to their ways of communicating what they know.

Examine each bush as you go, looking for signs of new shoots or damage that may require attention; then put them to sleep with a handful of bone meal and a shovel full of manure. They may look dormant, but the nutrients taken up by the roots in winter will provide the necessary minerals for strong shoots in early spring.

Two things the white-tailed deer are passionate about are roses and tulips, so why not plant the two together behind the fence, with a few winter pansies or violets, followed by early tulips, crowned by a glorious summer of roses, where each neighbour succeeds the other in colour and height?

November Recipes

Velvet Garlic Soup: Prep 20 minutes, cooking 20 minutes
Serves 4

4 cups chicken consommé (or miso)	1/2 cup heavy cream
6 cloves garlic, chopped	tsp sugar
1 sprig fresh sage	1 sprig fresh thyme, finely chopped
1 egg	Salt & pepper
Juice of 1 lemon	1/2 cup of sherry - optional
1 tsp cornstarch	

Heat the stock, garlic & sage, and simmer for 15 minutes. Blend until smooth and return to the pot. Blend the egg, lemon juice, cornstarch and sugar; add a cup of the soup and blend again. Return to the pot and reheat gently—do not boil. Whip the cream with the pepper and thyme. Stir in the sherry and ladle the soup into bowls, top with the cream mix and serve with fresh baked bread when the rain is pelting down.

Traditional Mincemeat: Prep 1 hour, cooking 3-4 hours
Makes 4-5 liters

Historically meat was preserved by salting, smoking, drying or sugaring. Honeyed ham and minced meat are the modern legacies. In mince pies, the minced and fruited meat was usually mutton or beef.

1 kilo ground or finely chopped beef	1 tbsp salt
1/4 kilo beef suet	1 cup molasses
2 kilos (approx) chopped crisp apples	1 bottle apple cider
1 kilo raisins	1 tsp ground mace
3/4 kilo currants	1 tsp ground cinnamon
3/4 cup diced candied citron	1 tsp ground cloves
3/4 cup diced candied lemon peel	2 tsp ground allspice
1 kilo light brown sugar	2 tsp ground nutmeg
	1/2 kilo chopped walnuts
	1/2 cup lemon juice
	1 cup brandy

Place the meat and suet in a heavy kettle and simmer for about 1-1/2 hours, stirring occasionally. Add all the remaining ingredients except the lemon juice and brandy. Stirring frequently, bring the mixture to a boil and simmer slowly for 2-3 hours with the lid on. Allow to cool overnight. Next day, stir and gently re-heat until simmering, add the juice and brandy, pour into sterilized canning jars, seal and cool. Try to keep for at least one month to allow the flavours to develop. Makes superb tarts, pies, muffins, and mid-winter gifts. ☞

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