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## December: Good Life Gardening ~ Brian Crumblehulme

After October winds and November rains, December is often one of the finest of the winter months; mild, dry, sunny, perfect for clean-up work with a small crackling fire and a chorus of frogs. It's also fun to poke about in the garden looking for flowers: hardy late blooming geraniums, fuchsias and primroses are still going strong while the aconites, witch hazel and jasmines shine like lights in the pale sun.

Last year my snowdrops started blooming around Christmas and this year may be the same because as I write they are already pushing through their maple leaf mulch. If you have an established bed of lilacs, you might want to select a few mature roots with strong shoots, pot them up and move them into a cool greenhouse or protected porch so they will produce early fragrant blooms in January or February. Do not try this with twelve foot giants; smaller side shoots three or four feet high with a few large terminal buds will produce larger blossoms than older plants. On a smaller scale, dicentra (bleeding heart) will respond to a little warmth also; and, as I mentioned before, you can treat yourself to early rhubarb and asparagus by mulching with lots of fresh horse manure or simply by digging up a couple of roots and warming them in a shed or garage for a few weeks.

Besides the ubiquitous poinsettias this season, you might come across some very attractive dwarf chrysanthemums in pots. These are all hardy perennials that will bloom well in the flower garden or at the back of the vegetable patch. After they have finished flowering on your windowsill, cut them down to about two inches and place them in a cool sunny location where they will send up lots of new shoots. These can be divided or simply planted out, as is, anytime the weather is mild and then they may be allowed to naturalise. Most chrysanthemums will grow to about three feet and make excellent cut flowers next year. The ones you buy in pots have been treated with growth inhibitors to make them dwarf but once free and in your garden they will resume their regular habit.

At this time of year I make a habit of providing a manure mulch to all my fruit trees and some ornamentals to keep the roots protected and well supplied with nutrients in preparation for an early start in spring. In the event of cold weather, a deep litter mulch will also protect figs, bays trees, roses and the like

from possible frost damage. On the coast, more plants are lost not to frost but to excessive damp and even drowning if the water table is too high. Years ago at my herb farm I lost twelve hundred rosemary bushes in a few short weeks one winter because they were planted in a low lying area that was far from wet but still too damp. If in doubt, dig a trench around sensitive trees and bushes to allow water to drain away.

Kiwi and grape vines need to be pruned back at this time if you want them to fruit next year. These vines will grow exuberantly into a jungle if left on their own and will not produce a good quality fruit. Select and support the leading shoots from each vine and cut all the laterals back to only two buds each as it is from these that next year's flowers and fruit will come. December is also the best time to move and prune soft fruit bushes and canes. Both raspberries and strawberries are relatively shallow-rooted plants that benefit from a lot of compost to retain moisture through the dry season. Dig a trench about a meter wide by half-a-meter deep and half fill this with compost and manure. Dress with a sprinkle of bone meal and lime, and plant two rows of canes or four rows of strawberry crowns firmly packed with quality top soil until almost level with the ground. Then add a second layer of manure, lime and bone meal to act as a nutrient mulch and to discourage weeds.

This too is the best time to plan for next year which is why the seed and plant catalogues arrive now along with their voluptuous colour renditions of ideal flowers and vegetables. Plan to plant only what you can manage each year as it is so easy to become overwhelmed by the amount of work required, especially if this is a new garden.

Always try to locate local or at least regional suppliers who have stock that is proven for this area. A mild coastal climate is not the same as a hot prairie one or a dry California one. Also, be wary of new varieties especially with vegetables; the traditional genetically stable ones will often provide a higher yield with a lot less fuss and attention.

Finally, when you are rummaging through the stored winter vegetables, give a thought to stored flower tubers also. Gladioli, dahlias and lilies that may be dried and stored in the garage will rot like bad apples if there is even a small blemish, and the mice

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.  
Email: [islandtides@islandtides.com](mailto:islandtides@islandtides.com).

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.  
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

just love them.

### Spiced Wines & A Sweetmeat

The Greeks and Romans would often dress up a mediocre wine with herbs and spices for special occasions; indeed the latter were fond of infusing drinks with their favourite flowers such as roses, violets or lavender. A variation on the hot mulled wine we associate with Christmas was a medieval restorative potion for the infirm; if it does not put you to sleep it will make you feel better. As a medicine it was named after Hippocrates and called hippocras or ypocras depending on how you pronounce it. Along with Christmas, it was re-invented, together with hot mulled ale, by the Victorians as a panacea for winter

**Hippocras**—Prep time 15 minutes, Drinking time 5 minutes: take 1 cup water, sugar to taste, cloves, cinnamon, and ginger. Place all the above in a saucepan, boil then simmer for 10 minutes. Meanwhile gently warm a bottle of chateau screw-top until hot but not simmering or you will lose all the alcohol. Strain the spice mix into the wine, add lemon if you will, adjust for sweetness, and share liberally.

**Roman Flower Wine**—This makes more sense in summer than winter but for the resourceful: take a bunch of fresh fragrant flowers, or dried lavender, place in a jug, cover with a light white wine, and steep for a day in a cool place. Strain off the flowers before they decay, and serve with a scattering of fresh petals.

**Roman Saturnalia Dates**—Use as an appetizer for an orgy by hand-feeding your favourite partner while lying on a couch after first finishing two glasses of lavender wine. Prep time 20 minutes, Cooking time 4 minutes: one box of the best Medjuli dates, equally many whole blanched almonds, honey, black pepper, and cinnamon.

Carefully remove the stones and replace with whole blanched almonds. Re-close each date and keep cool until needed. Warm some honey in a skillet, add the dates and fry gently until quite hot. Sprinkle with cinnamon and black pepper, roll again to coat the fruit and pour onto a serving platter. Serve hot. ☞

### Christmas 1573

Good husband & huswife, now chiefly be glad,  
Things handsome to have as they ought to be had.  
They both do provide against Christmas to come,  
To welcome their neighbours good chere to have some.

Good bread & good drinke, a good fier in the hall,  
Brawne, pudding, & sauce, & good mustard withal.  
Biefe, mutton, & capon, & turkey wel drest,  
Chese, apples, & nuttes, and good caroles to heare,  
As then in the cuntrey is counted good cheare.

What cost to good husband is any of this?  
Good household provision onely it is:  
Of other the like I do leave out a meny,  
That costeth the husband never a penny.

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