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## **Good Life Garden ~ Brian Crumblehulme January Calendar**

**S**urely one of the more exciting experiences this season has to offer are the new buds and flowers pushing through the snow and mud as if to say, 'Let's celebrate.' Late December may have been a miserable time for freezing pipes and clearing snow off the driveway but the majority of plants quietly waited for the returning of the light, until now, as I write, the snowdrops are flowering and the winter salads and vegetables are shaking off that morning-after-the-night-before look as they smell the sweet coffee of spring.

Traditionally, the first serious workday following the Christmas festivities was reserved for Monday after the Twelfth Night celebrations, also called Plough Monday when, after dark, the farm-hands blackened their faces and went around the various farms and country houses dragging a borrowed plough. Demanding largesse at each house, they would scratch a line across the driveway after every successful stop; but if the householders were mean and failed to pay up, the lads would plough the path turning it into a sea of mud for weeks to come.

The ritual also implied that this is the time of year to prepare for spring, dig the ground, prune the trees, rake the leaves, and spread the compost and manure onto the land in readiness for planting and sowing.

I try (not always successfully) to plan my winter garden so the beds are emptied in rotation and thereby replenished in succession with early spring sowings. On any dry day hilltop gardens and raised beds are easy to work but lower areas may still be too wet, in which case, this is the time to ditch and install drains to remove excess water. Sodden ground will kill vegetables, fruit and flowers, and because it is anaerobic, it will turn sour and inhibit the action of humus creating organisms.

It is too early yet for most planting and sowing but fruit trees and bushes can easily be moved if the ground is well drained. With some protection winter vegetables such as kale, broccoli, rapini, endive, even carrots and beets, are all fine but it is as well to clean out any dead and damaged leaves to reduce the risk of mold and slugs that can cause havoc in late winter.

If you are lucky enough to have a greenhouse or protected area, any sunny day in late January you can sow early carrots, beets, peas, onion sets and fava beans. At this time, seed potatoes can be selected and placed 'eyes up' in trays in a shed or basement with very low heat where they will begin to sprout. Large ones with multiple sprouts can be cut into two or three sections providing each piece has a shoot. Those with the strongest shoots can then be planted in rich loam two or three at a time in large pots in the greenhouse or sunny garage window for eating in March/April while the remainder can be planted out in February in well-drained beds with lots of compost for a May harvest. This way you get an extra crop on the same ground in time for summer planting.

Commercial growers have already sown many of the familiar spring plants you find on sale in garden centres in April but unless you have a greenhouse with reliable heat it is better to wait before sowing most vegetables and flowers. Nevertheless, it is certainly not too early plan your garden and trade or purchase seeds now from local dealers who carry varieties appropriate for this region.

By late January many tropical and semi-tropical plants hoarded in house windows over the winter are looking decidedly leggy and often naked. Always keep them as dry and cool as possible, prune them back to where the stock is still sturdy and allow them to rest awhile. I am always tempted to take cuttings of my favourite varieties; trim off the leaves and any soft or leggy growth, allow them to dry for a day, then pot them up and place them in a slightly warm window where, with luck, they will begin to root and produce new shoots. This works well for chrysanthemums, geraniums, carnations, antirrhinums and many so-called annuals that we are told to throw out. Kept dormant for the past few weeks, I have all of the above, even lemon verbena and oleander growing slowly and steadily until I can plant them out when the sun is truly warm.

Have a great garden this year.

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## Rum Mincemeat Muffins

If you still have a jar of mincemeat this makes a perfect breakfast treat

- Prep 10 mins, Baking 25 mins, Makes about 12.

- 1 ½ cup all purpose flour • ¼ cup sugar • 2 tsp baking powder • pinch of salt • ½ cup butter • ½ cup apple juice • 2 eggs, beaten • 1 cup mincemeat • ½ cup dark rum • 12 cubes sugar.

- Mix all the dry ingredients. Melt the butter, add the apple juice and eggs and fold into the dry mix—do not overmix. Fold in the mincemeat and spoon into well buttered muffin tins. Carefully soak the sugar cubes in rum and place one on top of each muffin mix. Bake for 20-25 minutes and serve warm with good coffee. In the unlikely event that there is any left over rum, add it to the coffee.

## A Dish of Beets

This delightful recipe hails from the early 17th Century when baked vegetable dishes were fashionable.

- Prep 20 mins, Baking 20 mins, Serves about 4.

- About ½ kilo peeled cooked beets, diced • About 1 cup currants or raisins • ½ cup brown sugar • Black pepper and nutmeg to taste • 1 cup grated cheddar cheese (or mozzarella).

- Peel and boil (or boil and peel) the beets. Dice and place in a mixing bowl. Add the dried fruit, sugar and spices and mix well. Place in a casserole dish and top with the cheese. Bake at 400°F for 20 mins by which time the cheese will be melted through the beets. Serve hot with your favourite meat and red wine. 🍷

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