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the chill of december

Posted in *All posts* on 13th October 2014

I can't really say that December is my favourite month of the year. I might be a winter-born baby but I am not a winter lover. I crave the season of mid-spring as soon as it begins to turn into early summer. The chill of the north winds of December finds me, like all year round gardens, putting layer upon layer of coats on and as I warm up the layers come off casually, left upon grass and branches; then I'll be running about looking for them in a panic, upon realizing that my phone or keys are in fact in that particular dumped fleece. It's not really a natural time of year to garden, the ground tells you to get off it as your boots seemingly absorb the wet earth. Yet winter is still a time of beauty within the garden - shrubs and trees, bark, stems and berries stand out as do seeded flower heads of Sedums, *Agapanthus*, *Dipsacus*, *Echinacea*, *Eryngium*, which all now add precious architecture to the soggy, shut down flower border.

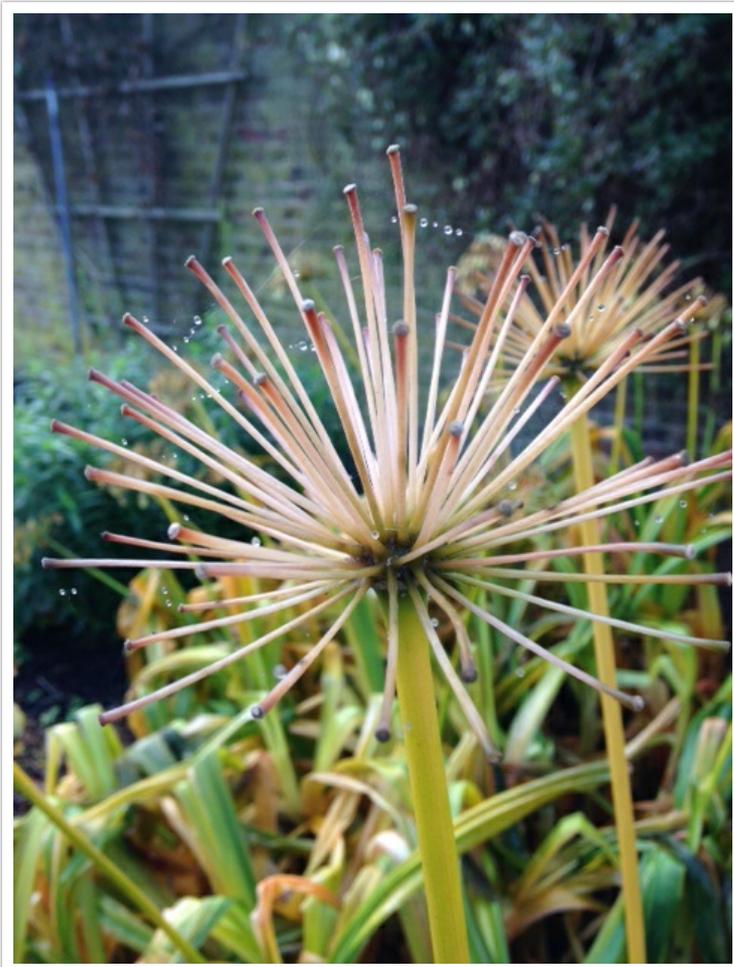


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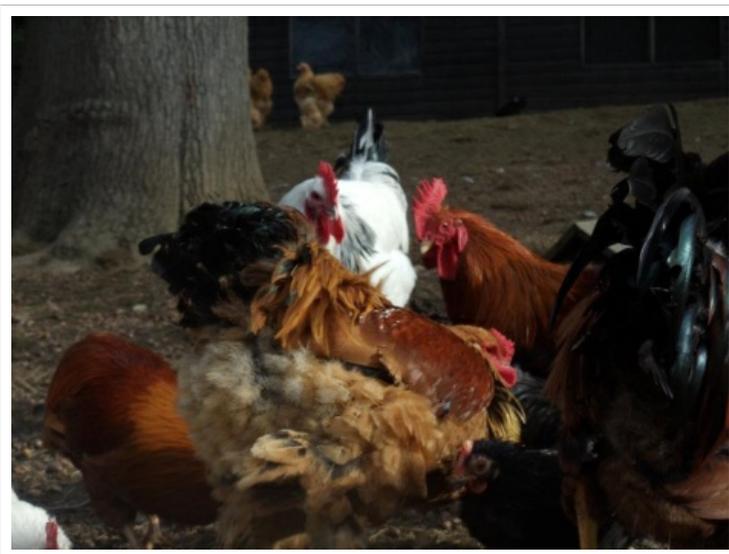
I'm not a big shrub lover but I absolutely adore Viburnum especially Viburnum x bodnantense 'Dawn' in bud the little flowers are a deep pink, then they open to a cream white with a beautiful honey like sweet scent the combination of the pink blooms in bud and the open white flowers is like 2 pints of milk that is blended with a couple of strawberries. Such late flowering plants are good for the odd warm winter days that wake up the big fat bumble bee queens from their slumbers. If I had a large garden they would certainly be on my list of plants to get!



I've been very off and on with bulb planting at home now that I'm working away. I still have a few to dot in, but our main avenue of dolly tubs I did back in mid-November (the correct time). With tulips it's better to be late setting them rather than to be early due to the warm autumn soil being able to hold onto viruses. This year's selection for the dollies have been Sarah's new [Brandy Snap Tulip Mix](#) that my mum was very taken with and the other dollies have been planted with the [Venetian Collection](#). Several Moroccan blue pots I've planted with [bulb lasagnes](#) of [Rococo](#) and [Orange Favourite](#) parrot tulips at the bottom then muscari in the middle layer then a top layer of purple crocus so I've got a good spring feasts for the bees then with the tulips I get the lovely exotic, bold, Alice in Wonderland style that I aim for. Christmas takes us all from our gardens, although the festivities demand foliage and flowers to warm our house interiors. Hyacinth, Ivy, [Amaryllis](#), cyclamens, holly sprigs – fabulous!



The festive bird for us this year is the spare cockerel in our chicken run that was hatched in spring. It is now starting to hassle his sisters and indeed his mother hen, not to mention bickering with his more stately father. On years where a flock of females for him to keep company has not been found, a home-reared bird has suited us well although it's me who has to do the deed of entering the hen house at night to pluck him from his cosy roost among the more cherished hens and well I won't continue! The issue with young, free-range cockerels is that they lack a decent amount of breast meat, so normally a plumper specially fattened up Light Sussex pullet albeit (still one that has had a decent amount of free ranging) is bought by my mum so we can eat as much chicken as we like without feeling sad that Charles, Henry or Richy won't be waking us all up in the morning! (Read my [tips for hen-keeping](#) for more info).



Why the goose fell from grace of many Christmas dinner tables and was replaced by the not very British turkey is to me rather odd. While geese are grazers of grass and make very hardy birds, turkeys are

greedy with young poults of even the traditional breeds requiring pellets and mash by the bag full, nor are they anywhere near as intelligent as geese and they are not very well suited to the damp British climate. On rainy days turkeys are best kept under cover or they just wonder about getting their feathers damp. Of the traditional breeds of turkey the Norfolk black is my favourite, good examples are a real coal black.

A friend of mine had a very friendly female turkey who was a useless mother of her chicks. She would just stay on the nest and allow her chicks to hatch out and die, totally ignoring them, so they would have to be fostered out once hatched to either a brooder or broody foster chicken. Turkey chicks often need (surprisingly) to be taught to eat! I've used all manner of colourful objects to entice them to begin the art of pecking – marbles I find to be very good. Adult and teenage turkeys love to have an apple tied up with string to peck at, it gets them very excited and hanging it so they have to jump a little to reach it is not only entertaining but ensures they develop nice juicy legs and don't get at all bored!

The commercial white American hybrid Christmas turkey is a sad, relic of the pure breeds. A beast of a bird that would never naturally occur in nature, growing at a high speed from hatching, crowded into sheds with their beaks clipped. These poor modern day turkey turkeys will never fly, perch or peck greenery or even live long enough if they are female to dream of nesting, the males grow too fat to even successfully tread their hens. So perhaps you'll choose to find a local free range turkey producer this season, as I'm sure many of you already, or perhaps some of you rear your own poultry, or maybe even opt for the traditional goose and enjoy the extra benefit of having the best possible roast potatoes thanks to its fat (although a long walk on Boxing Day will be required as a result of them!)

Have a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

My thanks to all whom have been reading my blogs upon garlic and sapphire this season, cheers!



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