

The Fragrant News

Winter 2006

Hi everyone,

This winter is colder and wetter than the previous few years with cold southerly blasts bringing snow and gales to New Zealand shores. Time to spend indoors and reflect and plan anew for the garden. It is time when things can be taken more quietly and energies can be recharged. Goodness knows, it will soon be spring and the garden will require constant attention again! The website { [HYPERLINK "http://www.fragrantgarden.co.nz"](http://www.fragrantgarden.co.nz) } has been revamped so call by it and see the new articles and interests there – great occupation for a cooler, indoors day.

MATARIKI GARDENING

The longest night of the year in June pre-empt the start of the New Zealand New Year when the bright cluster of stars makes its annual bright show. As dawn emerges, for the winter weeks, on the horizon can be seen Matariki. The Maori people measured the passing of time using a lunar calendar. The lunar cycle of 28 days did not quite match up with the more accurate Roman calendar that has most months with 30 or 31 days duration. So, it was accepted that in our part of the world each year a short break to celebrate the star cluster in the eastern dawn sky was necessary to keep the Maori year in kilter, balancing out the full year's cycle. This same cluster of stars is acknowledged by Japanese people as Subaru. (Yes! The star logo on a popular Japanese make of vehicle.) Plants in the garden acknowledge these events too by slowly starting to emerge from their winter dormancy. Each day, as the sunlight hours increase, the plants respond by setting bud and triggering root and foliage growth. With the slow growth cycle at the coldest part of the year it is the ideal time to be planting new fruit and specimen trees. The choice is determined by the size of the garden. There are many fruit trees to select for the home garden. If space is limited then smaller fruit trees such as gooseberries and currants can be considered. Grapes grow very well along a sunny fence if they are trained to send new shoots sideways on either wires or trellis. Fruit trees such as apples and pears can also be espaliered and trained to grow against a wall to save space. Most fruit trees for the home garden are now grown on dwarf root stock so there is going to be a mature, well shaped, fruit-bearing tree in the garden. As all fruit needs to have flower first in order to produce there will always be a blossom show in spring. Plums, peaches, apricots, apples and pears are the most popular. However, there are almonds, cherries, nashi pear, pomegranate, nectarines, persimmon, kiwifruit, and berry fruit, also to consider.



Established fruit trees will need pruning to both shape them and create better branches for light and maintenance of the fruit. A fruit tree needs to be carefully pruned so the height is limited to the reach of the fruit picker. Keeping the shape open so the new growth is not crossing over and rubbing against mature wood is also necessary. If in doubt, ask at the local garden centre. There will be qualified staff that will be more than willing to help. Traditionally, Matariki was the time of year that Maori people would plant trees and prepare the soil for new crop planting later in spring. Which just goes to show, gardeners the world over are all practical people and work with nature and its cycles. So, do get up early one of these mornings and enjoy the wonder of Matariki and celebrate in the garden with nurturing the bounty of the soil.

HERBAL WINTER FLOWERS

This time of year, as the days shorten and the cold lengthens, there are a few bright spots to be found in the garden. The autumn leaves have all been swept up and put into use as good compostable material in the bin. To help ward off the encroaching winter blues a glimmer of colour here and there is starting to show in the garden. Wallflowers are good hardy plants that form compact, low shrubs and last up to five years.

Plant them in full sun. They are now in full bud and some varieties have already burst into flower. Joy Gold, a perfumed, yellow type is busy flowering away. Soon to follow will be the other colours – purple, orange, red and other types with several tones. “Bowles Purple” has soft purple hues. (Mr Bowles was a Victorian gentleman in the true sense of the word. He inherited a fortune from an elderly, maiden aunt and luckily for him enough money that he never had to work for a living. Instead, he spent a horticultural life of breeding new varieties of plants.)



Hellebores or winter roses are just beginning to flower. They also come in a wide range of flower colours – soft creams and whites to pinks and reds. Many have spotted petals and all love the shade and damp spots in the garden. Like wallflowers they will keep flowering for months on end. At winter’s end they still are attractive with their unique seedpods.

Lungworts of the Pulmonaria family make a bright winter show of blue and pink flowers. They are named for their spotted leaf which is similar in shape and size to lungs. Hence their botanical name of the Latin word for lungs – pulmonary. In the times of ‘Doctrine of Signatures’ in the 1600s it was fashionable to align a ‘God-given’ purpose for particular plants. Because lungwort leaves were spotted and looked like lungs then it was assumed that their purpose was to heal complaints of the lungs. That many of the attributes of herbs were in fact correct is amazing! Lungwort was used to help allay pulmonary disease such as bronchial catarrh. It is more effective in treating gastro-intestinal complaints.

Polyanthuses are now beginning to flower. The modern hybrids can be planted out anywhere in the garden. They will flower away all winter and are very cheering and bright. They are commonly found as bedding plants and for little outlay can be dotted around the garden plot to provide flowering display. Remember to pick off the dead flowers and the plants will keep producing new buds all winter. Their old fashioned relatives are the primroses. These will flower from June onwards. Old-fashioned primroses are more hardy and will last many years if planted in shady, damp corners. They include cowslips, hose-in-hose and double flowering varieties. They too need to be dead-headed and will reward the gardener with months of fragrant colour. Crush a



leaf and smell the strong astringent aroma.

Even though the cold and wet are going to be prevalent in the next few months there will still be sunny days to get out and enjoy the bright, flowering spots in the garden.

Most people are not even aware that these flowers are all herbs.

ROSEHIP SYRUP

When pruning the roses in winter keep the rosehips and make them into rosehip syrup. This sweet, pleasant tasting beverage is rich in Vitamin C and is just as nice hot or cold. Put two teaspoons of the syrup into a mug and pour on boiling water for a soothing, warming tonic or mix the same quantity with cold water for a refreshing drink. Any rose that has a flower will provide a hip afterwards. Be it small or large it will still contain the nutrients needed. For every 250g of rosehips bring to the boil 1lt of hot water. Have the water boiling away in the pot and as quickly as possible, in the blender, break up each 250g measure of rosehips and pour the mash into the boiling water. (There is apparently a spoilage factor as the mashed rosehip comes in

contact with the oxygen in air.) Allow this mix to cook for about five minutes then turn off the heat, cover and let cool. Hang overnight in a muslin cloth. (Tie the cloth with string and suspend over a large bowl. Using cupboard doors over the kitchen bench or laundry bench is an option.) Once the liquid has dripped through return it to a pot and heat gently until boiling. (The drained mash is discarded). Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of sugar for every cup of liquid. This can be reduced if a less sweet drink is preferred. Boil until the sugar is dissolved. Pour into sterilized jars. When cooled store lidded and airtight jars in the fridge. They will keep all winter long. While the drink is high in sugar it is an energy booster and to be preferred to commercially- made soft drinks.

Herbally Yours,
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