

\* autumn bedding plants  
\* seeds to sow in autumn  
\* autumn lawn care  
& so much more...

**SAGA**  
magazine  
— guides

# gardening

*through autumn*

in partnership with







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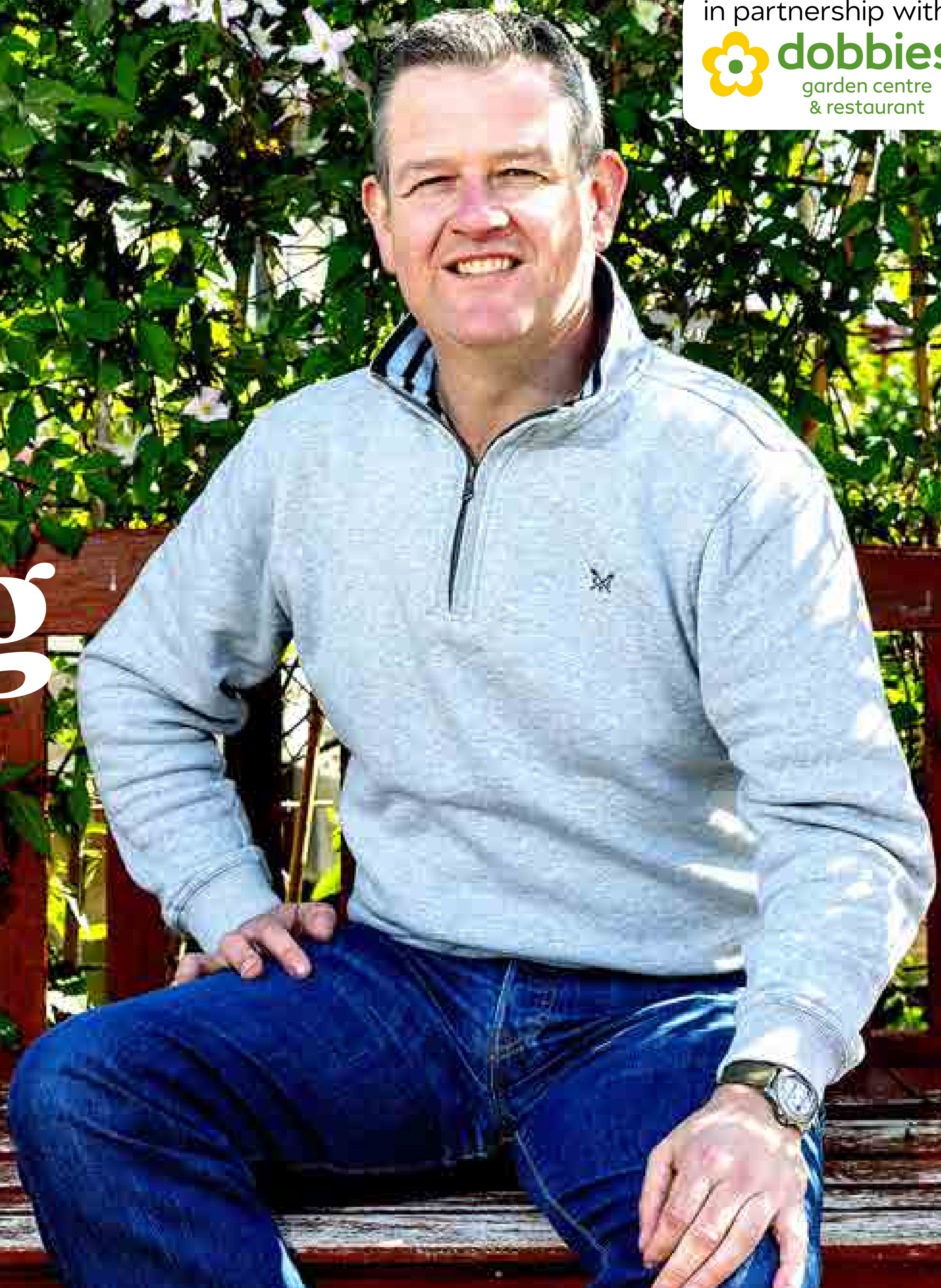
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ALAMY



# Autumn gardening with Dobbies Garden Centres



**A**utumn might signal the end of summer, but it's far from the end of the gardening season. In fact, according to Dobbies Garden Centres, it's one of the most exciting times to be out in the garden. In this autumn gardening guide, in partnership with Dobbies Garden Centres, Plant Buyer Nigel Lawton shares his expert seasonal advice to help you enjoy garden living in autumn and beyond. Whether you're refreshing containers with colourful autumn bedding plants, getting set for next year by planting spring bulbs, or preparing your lawn for the seasons ahead, this easy-to-follow guide will give you all the tips and inspiration you need to make the most of your garden. ☼

Dobbies' Plant Buyer, Nigel Lawton  
(© Dobbies Garden Centres)

## About Dobbies

This year Dobbies celebrates 160 years of helping British gardeners to grow. Dobbies was founded in 1865 by James Dobbie with headquarters near Edinburgh.

Dobbies shares its passion for gardens and plants through own brand and branded products, concession partners and services. Of its 53 stores, 52 have a restaurant or coffee shop where customers can stop for a bite to eat in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

Dobbies champions garden living all year round and offers a calendar of events and experiences that bring people and communities together.



# Make summer last longer

As earlier blooms begin to fade and plants set seed, go to your local garden centre and pick up a trolley full of autumn bedding plants to make your borders blaze with late colour

**L**ate-blooming **Michaelmas daisies** are just getting into their stride as other flowers are fading. The small-flowered varieties (*inset*) such as purple *Symphyotrichum* 'Little Carlow', pale pink 'Vasterival' and tall *Aster x frikartii* are less prone to mildew than the larger flowered varieties. Plant in a sunny spot and water well.

**Chrysanthemums** come into their own now, blooming as the days shorten. Hardy varieties such as pale lemon 'E H Wilson' and white 'Innocence' will brighten up the border until mid winter. These hardy varieties have small to medium-size blooms that are charming and daisy like. Get them in the ground by mid September – be sure to choose a spot that gets at least six hours of sun a day – or you

could simply set them in pots on the windowsill or on the garden table.

You should be able to pick up pots of **dahlias** too, from big blowsy flower heads to sprays of more delicate flowers (*above*). Sink the pots into the ground in gaps in the borders but bring them into a frost-free shed or greenhouse before the temperature drops.

**Crocosmias** are a hardy perennial option for late colour. They come in fiery reds and oranges; look out for varieties such as 'Lucifer' and 'Severn Sunrise'. The common *Crocosmia x montbretia*, also known simply as montbretia, has a bad reputation because of its tendency to spread and smother other plants, but these new named cultivars are not invasive. ☼





PROMOTION

# Autumn gardening tips

## with Dobbies Garden Centres



Ideas to try and jobs to tackle as the temperature starts to drop

**D**obbies Garden Centres' Plant Buyer Nigel Lawton treats autumn as two distinct stages in the gardening calendar. In early autumn, he recommends keeping beds and containers looking their best by deadheading and feeding. Later in the season, you should focus on structure, protection and getting set for a successful spring. Get pruning done, move tender plants indoors, and weatherproof outdoor spaces before winter. ➡





## ➡ **Instant colour**

Refresh displays with hardy favourites such as pansies, violas and wallflowers.

Chrysanthemums, pansies, violas and mini cyclamen are perfect for planting now and adding colour to containers and hanging baskets. To avoid your containers becoming waterlogged during rainy spells, raise pots off the ground on pot feet to improve drainage.

## **Weed and mulch**

Autumn is a good time to tidy your beds and borders. Get on top of weeds now while soil is still warm and moist. Then add a layer of organic compost around plants to lock in moisture and keep weeds at bay. Mulching

will also give plants a nutrient boost while giving your beds a neat and tidy look.

## **Plant for spring**

Dobbies has an impressive range of tulips, daffodils and other spring favourites in stores, with fantastic multibuy offers to help you save more.

## **Greenhouse prep**

As the growing season ends, give your greenhouse a seasonal reset. Clear out spent crops, bring in any tender plants, and make sure your greenhouse heater is working and ready to go. Give your greenhouse a good general tidy up. ✳

**More online** You'll find lots more autumn gardening tips, easy-to-follow guides and everything you need to make the most of the new season at [dobbies.com](https://dobbies.com)



# 10 to sow now for next summer's flowers

Make a blooming good start

Sow hardy annual seed now and you'll be ahead of the game for next year's display. The soil is still warm for quick germination and the resulting seedlings will have time to put down roots before the first frosts. Then when the temperature rises in spring they will romp away – giving you bigger, better, earlier flowers than a spring sowing. Here are our top ten recommendations:



1

Cottage garden favourites, **pot marigolds (*Calendula species*)** don't just come in orange. Look out for cultivars such as beige pink 'Touch of Red Buff' or intense crimson 'Red Gem'.



2

**Love in the mist (*Nigella damascena*)** comes in shades of blue, pink and white and has fine feathery foliage – an ideal cut flower. The seed pods are an added bonus for dried flower arrangements.



3

From the **cow parsley family** but more sophisticated and longer lasting, ***Ammi majus*** has flat white flowerheads on stems up to 90cm tall and is easy to grow.



4

For an airy cloud of blue flowers weaving through the border, try **larkspur. *Consolida regalis*** comes in the appropriately named Cloud series, which brings colour without dominating. They make great cut flowers too. ➔



➡ **Scabious (*Scabiosa species*)** come in many shades, from apricot to deepest maroon, and typically grow to around 1m. Pollinating insects love them.



**6 California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*)** in bud look like umbrellas waiting to unfurl. The flowers may not last that long but they are so prolific that you won't feel short-changed.



Old-fashioned **snapdragons (*Antirrhinum*)** are worthy of a comeback and deserve to be more widely grown. There are some glorious colour combinations available and if you're lucky plants may last a couple of years.



You'll be picking bunches of fragrant **sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*)** ahead of everyone else if you start them off now and overwinter them in a cold frame.



**9 Beautiful blue cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus*)** were once a common sight in cornfields of old. Start them off now indoors then overwinter the seedlings in a cold frame and plant out in spring.



**Poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*)** are so easy to grow and will flower all summer long. They may even self seed and do the job for you next year. ☼





PROMOTION

# Autumn lawncare

## with Dobbies Garden Centres

Dobbies' Plant Buyer Nigel Lawton says this is the perfect time to give your grass some TLC, helping it recover and grow back stronger next spring

### Keep on cutting

Don't put the mower away yet. Continue cutting for as long as the grass is growing. To avoid damaging your lawn, raise the blade height as temperatures dip, and don't mow in wet or frosty conditions.

### Feed and strengthen

Most lawns recover naturally after summer but you can give it a helping hand. A specialist autumn lawn feed will give tired grass a boost, encourage strong root development and toughen grass ahead of the colder months. Be sure to choose a feed designed for autumn use.

### Tidy and treat

Rake away fallen leaves to prevent rot and keep moss at bay by scarifying before it gets too cold to allow grass time to recover. It

might look patchy at first, but this process allows grass to breathe and will lead to a healthier lawn long-term. Brush top-dressing over your lawn to smooth uneven areas and encourage thicker growth.

### Improve drainage

Aerate your lawn with a garden fork or scarifying machine. This helps roots grow strong and resilient and withstand periods of waterlogging. If you have a larger lawn, don't worry about aerating the full area, just focus on sections that are worn. ☼

**More online** Follow these steps to lay the foundations for a lush, green lawn next spring. Find more tips and lawncare advice at [dobbies.com](https://dobbies.com).



# The best shrubs to plant for wildlife

It's the ideal time of year to plant shrubs and if you're deciding what to buy, why not go for something that is lovely to look at and great for wildlife



**I**f you don't have space for a tree in your garden, shrubs can provide vital cover and shelter for birds, insects and small mammals. Even when a garden has trees, shrubs form a useful understorey, offering denser thickets for birds to nest in, mammals to shelter under and insects to hide or even hibernate in.

When deciding what to plant where, bear in mind that birds and mammals behave quite differently. An isolated shrub close to a house will attract birds but small mammals may be wary of crossing open spaces to reach it. One option is to create a line of shrubs that

connect with the wider landscape – even a neighbour's hedge or shared boundary.

The ideal mix would be a range of evergreen and deciduous species. Dense evergreens are ideal for nesting birds, particularly blackbirds, robins and dunnocks, which may start nest-building before deciduous shrubs come into leaf.

In winter birds often move from the surrounding countryside into gardens in search of food: berried shrubs will be sure to attract them while brightening up your garden at the same time.

Turn the page for some suggestions. ➔



## ☛ Shrubs with autumn berries for birds



## Shrubs for a year-round supply of nectar

### Autumn



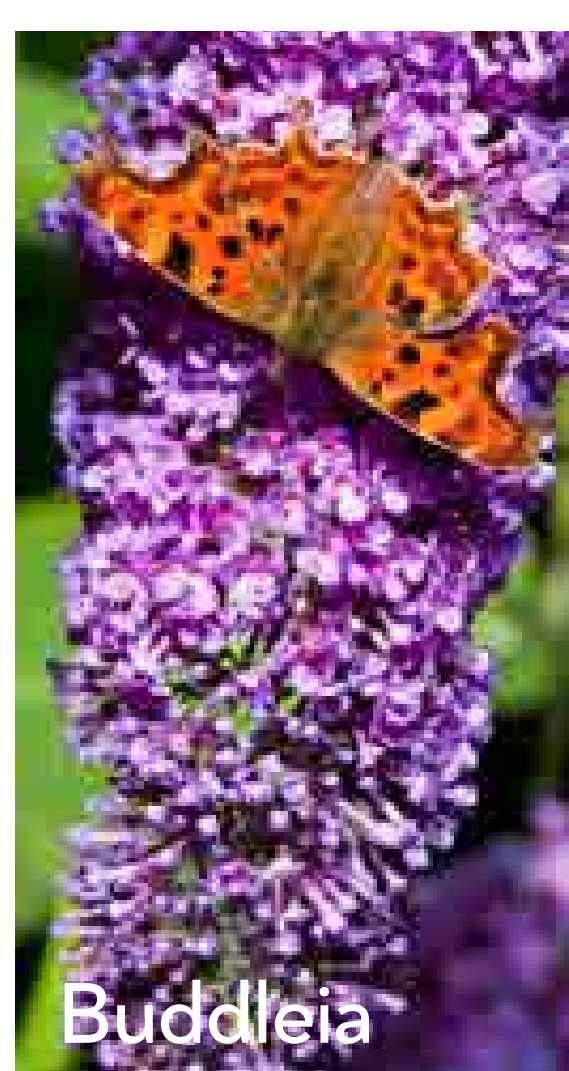
### Winter



### Spring



### Summer





PROMOTION

# Planting spring bulbs

## with Dobbies Garden Centres

Dobbies Garden Centres' Plant Buyer Nigel Lawton on why planting spring bulbs is an impactful, cost-effective way to create a showstopping garden next year

### Bring gardens to life early

Spring-flowering bulbs planted in autumn work their magic over winter and burst into colour as early as February. Daffodils, tulips and crocuses are all great for adding life to beds, borders and containers while providing vital food for pollinators. With a bit of effort, these hardy bulbs will reward you year after year, making them a smart investment.

### Long-lasting displays with layered planting

For maximum impact try layered planting, also known as lasagne planting. By planting different spring bulbs in tiers within the same pot, you'll extend the life of your display and enjoy waves of flowers. Place the largest, latest-flowering bulbs at the bottom, such as

tulips, followed by narcissus, and finish with crocuses near the top. With a little planning, your containers will deliver non-stop colour from late winter right through spring.

### Plant with purpose

New this autumn, Dobbies has partnered with Alzheimer's Research UK to launch The Sensory Garden 15 Bulbs Collection. The new limited-edition ARUK mix includes colourful and fragrant favourites such as *Allium* 'Purple Rain', *Narcissus* 'Bridal Crown' and the tulip 'Blushing Apeldoorn', designed to engage the senses and bring layers of colour, fragrance and texture. £5 from every pack goes directly to Alzheimer's Research UK, helping fund life-changing dementia research. ☼

**More online** Discover expert tips, step-by-step guides and the full range of bulbs including autumn flowering bulbs at [dobbies.com](https://dobbies.com)



# The great autumn tidy up

How to make your garden look neat and tidy as the growing season draws to a close with just a few simple changes

**A**t this time of year, tidying the outdoors is really not very different to tidying up your indoor living space: just cast a critical eye over the garden and you'll soon spot things out of place. Simply going round and picking up old flower pots – empty any spent compost ➡

GAP PHOTOS



➡ into the compost heap – makes a difference. Putting them away in the shed, along with half-empty sacks of compost, canes and plant supports goes a long way to restoring order. Store watering cans in the shed: if they are left out with water in and it freezes, this can crack the can. Put the hose away too.

Sweep paths and patios free of leaves as these can be a slip hazard in wet weather. If you don't have a dedicated leaf-mould



heap, sweep the leaves onto the borders and tuck them round plants as an instant mulch.

Thinking has changed over the years and it's now no longer obligatory to cut back every last dried stem and sweep away every leaf to demonstrate your gardening skills. In fact, leaving stems of perennials in place helps protect borderline hardy plants such as penstemons and some salvias when the temperature drops; it also protects emerging

buds. Seedheads and stems can also be decorative: think of teasels silhouetted with a dusting of hoar frost.

Wildlife also benefit from this change in practice. The dried stems of rudbeckia, echinacea, teasels and echinops provide shelter for hibernating insects, including beneficial pollinators. Even other not-so-beneficial species are still part of the food chain, supporting birds, bats and amphibians. The seedheads attract seed-eating birds such as goldfinches, while bluetits will forage for insects tucked among the crevices.

Spring is now seen as the best time to cut back and compost dead material, just as the garden is bursting back into life. Similarly, don't be tempted to trim back any unruly ivy: it's one of the latest plants to flower and a vital source of nectar for late-flying bees and butterflies such as red admirals (left) and peacocks before they hibernate. Ivy berries keep blackbirds (above), thrushes and redwings well supplied throughout winter. ❁



# Planting bare-root trees and shrubs

The low-cost no-fuss option that's right for autumn and winter

**B**are-root trees and shrubs, including roses, are dormant plants that the grower lifts once their leaves have dropped, ready to send out by mail order. They are fast to establish, rooting quickly into the ground and growing away in spring. They can be planted from October to March provided the ground isn't frozen.

\* Prepare the ground before your plants arrive by covering the area with old carpet or cardboard to prevent the soil from freezing.

\* Once you are ready to plant, soak the tree roots in water for 30 minutes or so while you prepare the planting hole. Dig a generous- ➔

GAP PHOTOS





**TIP** To give your tree or shrub the best chance of establishing, create a weed-free circle round the trunk. This means that when you water, it gets straight to the roots and is not intercepted by plants growing at the base. You can mulch the circle but keep the mulch at least 10cm away from the base of the trunk to avoid rotting.

**TIP** Bare-root roses will have been grafted on to a rootstock and current advice is to dig a hole deep enough to ensure that the graft – the visible bump – is buried around 8cm below soil level.

Bare-root fruit trees, on the other hand, should always been planted with the graft above soil level to prevent suckering, where the rootstock sends up shoots.

⬅ size hole and add some home-made compost or well-rotted manure. If you are planting a tree that will need staking, put the stake in position before putting the tree in the hole; you may damage the roots if you add a stake later.

\* The tree needs to be planted at the same depth it was growing at, before it was lifted and delivered to you. You should be able to see a line across the stem that indicates this.



\* Lay a cane across the planting hole and then use it to line up the soil surface with the mark on the stem.

\* Spread the roots out in the planting hole and replace the soil in stages, gently firming it in to get rid of any air pockets.

\* Water generously and keep well watered for the next year until your tree or shrub is properly established. ☼



# Sort out your shed

It's the perfect time to get everything in order ready for next year

**A**rm yourself with a broom and dustpan and brush, plus a couple of damp cloths and a dust sheet. Lay the dust sheet on the ground and start by emptying the shed completely, setting out the contents on the sheet. Then sweep out the debris, brush shelves, clean the windows and use a damp cloth to get rid of cobwebs. ➡

GAP PHOTOS



➡ As you start to put things back, clean and assess them.

Begin with all those plastic plant pots accumulated over the year. Brush them free of soil – and any overwintering pests – wash if necessary, then leave to dry before stacking, preferably on a shelf rather than the floor. Recycle any that are broken.

Do the same for terracotta pots, seed trays and module trays.

Creating a tool rack for large items such as spades and forks will help keep the floor space free. Simply install a wooden batten across one wall and insert screws at the appropriate spacing to hold tool handles in place. Then you can see at a glance if anything's missing.

Use trugs or baskets to store small hand tools such as trowels, hand forks, dibbers, compost scoops and secateurs.

Old wooden apple crates make ideal storage for bigger items such as garden hoses and shears and are easy to stack. Use crates or boxes to organise open bags of Vermiculite, water-retaining granules and sharp sand, to keep them from toppling over and spilling

## On the shelf

A shed needs shelves for all those fiddly bits and bobs such as plant labels and marker pens, balls of twine, scissors, pairs of gloves, etc. If you store opened packets of seed in your shed, it's vital to keep them dry. Rather than using a tin for storage, use an airtight plastic container.

## Smarten up the exterior

If the weather forecast is good, take the opportunity to freshen up your shed's appearance with a lick of paint or a wood stain. Muted shades of green and blue will tone in with surrounding greenery. Or if your shed is less than lovely, rather than draw attention to it, disguise it by training a clematis or one of the less thorny varieties of climbing rose over it. ☼



ALAMY, GAP PHOTOS, GETTY



# Give your tools some TLC

Get your spades, forks and hand tools in tip-top condition – you'll be grateful you did once spring comes round

**W**e all know we should get into the habit of cleaning tools after every use, but equally we all know how tiresome that can be at the end of a long hard day. Now's your chance to make up for a summer of neglect.

First use a wire brush to clean dirt, debris and any rust from spades and forks, followed by a good scrub in soapy water. If you're worried about fungal diseases – maybe you have an allotment and don't want to transfer spores to your garden – ➔





➡ then now's the time to spray tools with an alcohol-based disinfectant. Leave this to dry, then rub with a cloth to remove any surplus.

To protect the metalwork over winter add a protective film of camellia oil – just one or two drops on a rag. Standard lubricating oil tends to leave a residue that can build up over time. Follow this method for trowels and hand forks too.

Finally rub wooden handles with a wire brush,

**TIP** Some well-organised gardeners keep a bucket of moist gritty sand by the shed door and plunge spades and forks in it at the end of the day. The sand acts as an abrasive and removes dirt and mud.



**TIP** Got a can of WD40 in your tool kit? Use it to loosen dirt and sticky sap on secateurs and shears, and give them a final spray once clean as a protective coating. And use it on the mechanism too to keep it working smoothly. A coating of WD40 on your spade will protect against rust and corrosion; it also makes digging smoother and stops dirt clinging to the blade.

use medium-grade sandpaper to smooth off any snags and then finish with a protective coat of beeswax.

## Sharpen secateurs and hori hori knives

Invest in a specially designed sharpening block: it will not only make sharpening the blade easier but you can also use the block to clean the blade too.

Start by dipping the block in water, then use a fine continuous sweeping gesture across the blade to sharpen it. Dry blades and finish with a protective coat of camellia oil. Some secateurs can be dismantled, which makes cleaning and sharpening even easier. ❁



As autumn leaves whirl down and cover the lawn, don't sigh in exasperation. Rake them up to make leaf mould – your flower beds will be grateful

**T**rees absorb most of the nutrients from their leaves before they shed them so the leaves you rake up are mostly composed of lignin, a tough fibre. Lignin rots down in a different way to the ➡

# How to make leaf mould



**TIP** Add grass cuttings to the leaves you collect and you'll increase the nitrate content of the leaf mould, which will act as a source of nitrogen, boosting plant growth when you use it.



➡ rest of the plant material in your compost heap, which is why it's better and more efficient to rot them down separately in their own dedicated pile. The process relies on slow-acting fungi, which work best at a lower temperature than a regular compost heap, where waste is broken down by bacteria.

All you need to do is simply rake up autumn leaves and leave them in a heap to rot down naturally – this can take two years to produce a rich crumbly brown mix. If this sounds too untidy, make a structure from chicken

wire and stakes or pack the leaves into bin bags or hessian sacks instead. If you use a bin bag, perforate it using a garden fork to let some air in and make sure the leaves are damp when you add them.

You can also use the mower to gather up your leaves from your lawn instead of raking them. Run the mower over them and empty the box into your heap or sack. Shredding the leaves in this way will help them decompose faster and incorporate some grass cuttings – see Tip box. 🌿

## HOW TO USE LEAF MOULD

- \* Dig it in to improve the soil before planting. It will improve drainage on heavy soil.
- \* Mulch it round plants in summer to conserve moisture in the soil.
- \* Cover bare earth with it in winter to protect soil from heavy rain, which can wash away nutrients. It will also feed earthworms and other soil microorganisms.





# Make your garden a haven for hedgehogs

These nocturnal garden visitors are delightful to watch – as well as being a gardener's best friend

**M**any gardeners have never seen a hedgehog in their garden and there may be a good reason for that: access. If a garden is securely fenced hedgehogs can't get in! And while they are known to climb, they can't tackle a 6ft fence.

The British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS) is campaigning for gardeners to help

create a hedgehog highway . All you need to do is make hedgehog-sized gaps in fences on all sides of your garden. The gaps need to be 13cm square for an adult hedgehog to pass through comfortably. Encourage neighbours to do the same and hedgehogs will be able to roam safely through the area – they've been known to cover up to 2 km a night.

## **Why should you want hedgehogs in your garden?**

They are natural pest controllers, eating slugs, caterpillars and earwigs, as well as a wide range of other insects. It goes without ➔





⚠️ saying that you shouldn't use slug pellets as these are toxic to small mammals and birds that feed on the slugs.

To encourage hedgehogs to stay, you could build them a house – particularly if you haven't got a wild corner in your garden where they can nest undisturbed... it's not uncommon to find hibernating hedgehogs in a pile of prunings that you hadn't got round to taking to the tip.

At its simplest you just need to create something with a roof and preferably a narrow entrance – the BHPS has a blueprint on its website [hedgehogstreet.org](http://hedgehogstreet.org). Install it in the quietest spot possible, perhaps tucked under a hedge, preferably with the entrance facing south, to keep out cold north winds.

Leave some dried leaves and grass nearby so that the hedgehog can help itself to bedding or put a few handfuls inside.

## Garden with care

Once you know you've got hedgehogs as regular visitors, take great care when you're maintaining your garden. Wildlife hospitals see injuries every year from strimmers, mowers and hedge cutters. Always check rough areas before strimming – even better, leave some areas to rewild so that wildlife can safely forage. And take great care when turning your compost heap – it may turn out that a hedgehog has decided it's the ideal place to rear their young.

## Pond safety

If you've got a pond make sure that it has a sloping shallow end or install a ramp or half submerged rocks. Hedgehogs are strong swimmers but they can become trapped in ponds with sheer sides. Keep ponds topped up in dry weather to avoid this. If you don't have a pond, leave out a dish of water in hot weather. ☘



# Planting winter containers

Prepare for the bleaker months in the garden with a show of artfully planted pots

**W**hen there's not much to look at in the garden, winter containers can cheer things up. You want to be able to see them from the house, maybe from the kitchen window or the sitting room – or put them right by the door so that you can appreciate them as you go in and out.

## Big is best

Choose substantial pots that will hold a selection of plants. Put pots in their final position before you plant them up, when they will be a lot heavier. Adding pot 'feet' will protect soil – and plants – from becoming waterlogged in bad weather. ➡

GAP PHOTOS



Top  
plants for  
winter  
containers

## ☛ Shopping for plants

This is the ideal opportunity to plan your planting theme. Grab a trolley at the garden centre and get going. Start by picking a key plant – this could be a shiny evergreen shrub or even a bold grass – to anchor the design. As you walk round the displays, add contrasting shapes and foliage, berries and a colourful cyclamen or two. Plants grow very little in winter, so buy good-sized plants for maximum impact.

## Experiment first

At home do a trial run before planting. Set your key plant on the ground and arrange the others around it, making sure that each plant shows its best side – look carefully at each plant and you'll see that most do look better on one side compared to the other.

Once you're happy with the arrangement, it's time to settle the plants in their new home.

Add a layer of gravel or broken pot shards to the base of your container for good drainage then fill it to within about a third from the top with good-quality compost – a John Innes number 3 mix is ideal.

Set your key plant in position first, then add the supporting cast, spaced more closely than you might a summer container, for more impact. Add compost to fill in gaps between rootballs. Make sure to leave at least 2cm between the rim of the pot and the compost surface to make watering easy. ☘

**TIP** To remove a plant from its pot, turn it upside down while holding on to the main stem and gently tap the base of the pot. You may need to squeeze the sides gently too. If the roots are tightly wrapped around each other, carefully tease some of them apart.

## 5 evergreens

\* ***Sarcococca confusa*** has shiny pointed leaves and small, scented white flowers



\* ***Skimmia japonica*** has white flowers and bright red berries



\* ***Viburnum tinus*** has clusters of pale pink or white flowers.



\* ***Hebe 'Emerald Gem'*** or ***'Green Globe'*** forms a bun-shaped mound of tiny bright green leaves.



\* ***Ilex aquifolium 'Green Pillar'*** is an upright slender female holly with dark-green leaves and red berries.





## 5 grasses

\* **Acorus gramineus 'Ogon'** is a fountain of green and gold leaves.



\* **Carex morrowii 'Variegata'** has olive-green leaves with cream edges.



\* **Carex testacea** has a swirl of fine olive-green to brown leaves with tints of orange.



\* **Luzula sylvatica 'Aurea'** is a rosette of butter-yellow strappy leaves.



\* **Ophiopogon planiscapus 'Nigrescens'** is low-growing with black leaves.



## 5 perennials

\* **Bergenia 'Bressingham Ruby'** has large, glossy leaves and bright pink flowers in early spring.



\* **Helleborus foetidus 'Wester Flisk Group'** has green flowers and finely divided foliage, both tinged with red.



\* **Heuchera** comes in a range of coloured leaves.



\* **Polypodium vulgare** is a tough evergreen fern.



\* **Vinca minor 'Atropurpurea'** or lesser periwinkle is trailing plant that flowers in spring.





# Winter pruning fruit trees

Sharpen your secateurs and follow these handy tips for boosting your crop next year

## Why prune?

Pruning keeps fruit trees productive and healthy. Winter pruning when the tree is dormant means that when the tree bursts into growth in spring there will be fewer buds, which will receive more nutrients. When a tree is still relatively young, winter pruning stimulates it to grow strongly and form a sturdy network of branches. This applies to apples, crab apples (*inset*), pears, quince and medlars.



## Pick the right tools

Secateurs, long-handled loppers and a pruning saw will all come in handy. Make sure that they are sharp and suitable for the job – loppers and secateurs have a maximum width that they can cope with.

## Start small

Remove thin weak shoots and any damaged branches. Then reduce this year's growth – it's easy to identify as the bark looks silvery grey, compared to brown older wood. Cut the new growth back so that you are left with four to six buds.

Finally cut back the main 'leader', the tall branch at the top of the tree, by about a half. Make the cut close to a bud.



## Mature trees

Look for any branches that cross each other or rub against each other and remove these first. Then trim overlong or straggly growth. Keep standing back from the tree and checking on the overall shape so that you don't end up with a lopsided effect. You're aiming for a strong open structure. Don't be afraid to cut off some branches right back to the trunk, to let in light and air.

## Stone fruit trees

Plums, apricots, peaches and cherries should be pruned as little as possible, ideally after the fruit has been picked and when the leaves are still on the tree. Don't prune them in winter as this makes them vulnerable to bacterial disease. ❀



**D**eal with moveable objects first. Gather up cushions and parasols and put them away. Stack garden chairs so that they're heavier and harder for the wind to lift. Move them to a more sheltered spot, along with the garden tables – setting them against a wall or fence offers some protection.

Then turn your attention to pots and containers. A tall plant in a relatively low pot will be vulnerable to wind damage, so lift or drag it to a more sheltered corner. Tie branches of tall container →

# Batten down the hatches

When a storm is forecast, be prepared and take action before high winds and heavy rain hit



**TIP** Shrubs and roses are vulnerable to wind rock, where the wind literally gets under the branches and lifts the plant from the soil. You can reduce the risk of this happening by pruning them back. Shortening long whippy branches by about a third will help. You should be thinking about winter pruning roses anyway, so think of it as just bringing the timing forward.



**TIP** Check climbers such as clematis, wisteria and honeysuckle, and make sure they are securely tied into the framework they are growing on. Add extra ties if necessary.

➡ shrubs or trees together with a pair of old tights or strips of horticultural fleece so that they present a smooth profile to the wind. Group pots together so that they protect each other from toppling and smashing. If your hanging baskets are still going strong, lift them down and tuck them away or put them in the shed temporarily.

Strong winds can lift watering cans with ease so bring them undercover or fill them with water to add weight. If you've got more than one wheelie bin, rope them together – a

bungee cord is ideal – and if they're full, they'll be less likely to blow around.

Clear gutters if it's safe to do so and check that drain covers are free from leaves to avoid flooding in heavy rain.

Finally cast your eye over the shed and/or summerhouse. Nail down any loose roof covering that you've been meaning to fix all summer and close the windows. In the worst case the wind can lift the whole structure if it finds a way in through the window – at very least it will blow the glass out. ☹



# Flowering bulbs for Christmas

When there's very little in bloom in the garden, what could be nicer than a pot of narcissi or hyacinths coaxed into flowering out of season?

**T**he technique for persuading spring bulbs to flower early is known as forcing. It's a method of tricking the plant into flowering using a combination of cool temperatures and excluding light. Classic bulbs to force include narcissi and hyacinths, but it is also worth trying crocuses, miniature spring irises, grape hyacinths (muscari) and anemones. Amaryllis can be forced for Christmas too but won't need chilling, just a period in the dark. ➔

GETTY





☛ \* Start by inspecting the bulbs: they should be firm and free from mould and rot.

\* Choose a suitable pot with drainage holes. Add free-draining potting compost and sit the bulbs with their tips just below the surface of the compost.

\* Water the pot, then find a cool dark spot where it can be left undisturbed for around 10-12 weeks – a windowless shed or a cupboard in an unheated room is ideal. For best results the temperature shouldn't rise much above 12.5C. There's no need to water during this time.

\* After this cool dark period, bring the pots into a bright cool room indoors. At this point you could carefully repot the bulbs into a more decorative container such as a vintage china bowl: just add a layer of broken crocks or pebbles to the base in lieu of drainage holes. Or simply stand the pot inside a decorative cache-pot.

\* Overwatering is likely to be your biggest mistake so be sparing with the watering can.



\* To be sure of success, start forcing your bulbs in September or buy pre-forced bulbs in your local garden centre later in the year (you won't need to chill these). If you don't get round to forcing your own, there's no need to miss out entirely, you can still treat yourself to some potted, ready-forced hyacinth and narcissi or a spectacular amaryllis in your local garden centre. ☘





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**Allium Purple Rain** - Striking flowers appealing to sight and touch

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**Tulip Blushing Apeldoorn** - Colourful bobbing flowers

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