

## Winter is Wonderful – part 2

(written on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008)

And so the year rocks itself once more to a gentle, almost imperceptible, halt. I write this just after the winter solstice this year – a day which manages to inject hopefulness and expectation into the coiled-in introversion that settled sometime during late November.

As a gardener, autumn's flaring acquiescence into winter is no longer a clear cut event (was it ever?). This year's shift was a little earlier than previous years. Our traditional first week of December cold spell stretched wider this year to a shade under three weeks. Still, some stalwarts from the summer and autumn beds soldiered on, jaw set firm, head lowered, better to divert the frequent and icy easterly blasts.

First prize must go to my Mallow, *Lavatera x clementii* 'Barnsley', it has flowered non stop since June and has only just given up the ghost. A close runner up must be *Verbena Canadensis*, trailing verbena, in the

hanging baskets – splashes of welcome lilac and pink lasted well into the month. With a provenance of the Canadian shield, though, should I have expected anything less?

Walking out into the garden, most things above the surface have now taken on an air of quiet slumber. I see the garnet-red shine of the buds on the wrinkly bark of the *Sambucus Nigra*, Black Elder, promising new activity in the spring. Neatly arranged on opposite sides of the stems, they remind me of that quiet satisfaction you experience when you've done all the work for the following morning the night before.

And then there's *Viburnum tinus* 'Eve Price' emerging for the 'night shift' of the year – opening up umbels of delicate pinky-white flower clusters like a dark coated crowd collectively shaking out their brollies. But don't be fooled – the delicateness is only skin-deep for this is a tough cookie.

Meanwhile, under the surface much is happening. Tiny snouts of grey-green are already sniffing the air – the papery globes planted several years ago now give away signs of their forceful, upward march. Triggered silently sometime in the late summer, now reaching up through the darkness with hope as much as anything, once more to take their place in the outer, visible realm of the garden in early spring, these bulbs' snouts let me know that if the natural movement of life were a shape it would be an arching upwards and outwards - a hopeful, vital arc. When much in the above-garden environment currently displays an introverting, pulling inward, life-leaving movement, this modest counterpoising rhythm ensures that balance in the garden, however ephemeral, is once again restored.

The garden at this time of year reminds me that everything is naturally interconnected and successional: this moment of solstitial stillness is just a temporal (and temporary) station on the helical journey that is both life and time itself. Why do I feel this pause so strongly this year? Perhaps it's an effect created by the awareness I have of the baton-passing in operation – rather like the glance we make at the clock only to see the hand momentarily pause and then take up its stilted, sweeping route once more. The garden in winter is a palimpsest of life's deeper, quieter secrets.

*A meditation on winter: Embrace this time of stillness in the garden. See the opportunity it gives for quiet reflection on the 'bones' of the garden – its shape, its size, its underlying structure. These three qualities will not be so readily apparent in other seasons but they are what gives the garden its essential character. Every garden needs a time to rest and recuperate and so do we. How do we ensure the season of winter in our own lives? Do we take enough time to be still, reflect and review? What can the garden in winter tell us about the nature and character of life itself?*

