

DECEMBER

This time of year is all about preparing for Christmas, but you may find that going out into the garden to do a few jobs will be both relaxing and will set you up for a good start when the new year comes. The plants are dormant so you can get on with things that perhaps weren't possible earlier.

HARVEST leeks and sprouts, making sure to take sprouts from the bottom of the plant where they are more mature.

MULCH The light levels are now quite low, which means that leaves of brassicas, especially sprouts and broccoli, turn yellow because they don't get enough light to maintain their healthy green colour. They are unsightly but, more important, they become havens for slugs to nestle away from the cold, so remove them and mulch the ground with about 3 to 5 cm of compost. especially brassicas. Also mulch asparagus and autumn-flowering raspberries now their stems have been cut down.

PLANT bare-rooted trees, hedging plants, roses and fruit since they are dormant now and can be planted if the ground isn't frozen or too waterlogged. A bonus is that no peat or plastic will have been used in their production, great for the environment!

PRUNE apple and pear trees as in the jobs for February. We prune to restrict the amount of wood the tree develops, thereby putting more energy into growing fruit, and to achieve an open, cup-shaped form to give best exposure to the elements on all sides. Follow the three 'D's – remove dead, dying, diseased branches and any crossing over others, and cut back to fruiting spurs or fruiting tips, depending on your tree. Take out only one-third of branches in any season. Keep surrounding ground weed-free.

GARDEN MAINTENANCE

- Clean and sharpen tools, including the mower, which might need servicing after all the hard work throughout the year! Tidy the shed and do all you can to ensure a good start to next year! Make sure to remove any dried sap from blades of secateurs and other cutting implements since it can cause disease to spread from one plant to another. Also take the quiet period to get your tools sharpened or do it yourself.
- Continue to clear leaves off hard surfaces and gather them up (see information in November).
- Check outdoor taps and make sure they are protected from frosts. Speaking of water, check your pond to ensure it's not freezing – if it is, melt the ice by placing a hot pan on the surface but never just break it since fish and amphibians won't

like it! Consider installing a pond heater or a water feature that will keep the water moving.

- Check that your greenhouse heater is working – buy a thermometer to make sure you know how close to zero the temperature falls, which will help you regulate the temperature setting accurately and avoid wasting money.

JUNIORS' JOBS FOR DECEMBER

Let's look at the **houseplants we often have in our homes at Christmas**.

Poinsettias in lots of colours, but usually red, cyclamen and Christmas cactus are very popular – perhaps you can look them up in a book or on the internet so you can see what they look like. They are very beautiful and worth looking after!

So how to keep them healthy:

- Don't overwater them – they grow more slowly as the light gets dimmer and the temperatures lower, so they need less water. If the pot is put inside another pot so it looks more attractive, make sure any water gathering in the base of the outer pot is emptied away rather than letting the plant pot sit in it.
- Central heating and fires dry the air, so put the pot plants together in a group so they share the moisture that's around them. They can even be put on a flat dish or tray with pebbles or gravel, with a small amount of water added, so the evaporation of the water will keep the air moist.
- Put the plants in a brighter light in the very dark months of winter but not near fires or radiators.
- They will bring joy to everyone and they, themselves, will be happy!