

THE WOODLAND GARDEN AT THE OLD RECTORY IN NORFOLK. BELOW RIGHT: SWEET PEAS IN ONE OF THE BEDROOMS

A YEAR IN THE GARDEN

TENDER LOVING CARE

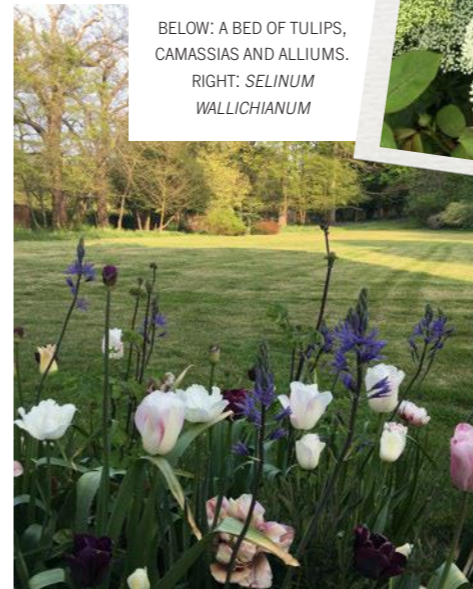
Justine Picardie describes the soothing ritual of catering for her plants' needs – and explains how you can do the same this winter

It has been a year since we moved into the Old Rectory in Norfolk, and during that time, the world has undergone a seismic change; yet here, in a quiet East Anglian village, the garden has been a source of reassurance and delight. Yes, there have been setbacks: winter storms brought down several trees; torrential rain turned part of the lawn into a soggy marsh; the voracious rabbits feasted on tender seedlings; and the summer drought wreaked havoc with my clematis. But on the whole, gardening on a daily basis has kept me calm during the coronavirus crisis, and taught me which plants will thrive here; and when they're looking contented, that makes me happy, too.

I've also learnt that if something doesn't work, it isn't a disaster; and in this sense, the garden provides a consoling sense of perspective. It's rather like cooking: you start with a book of recipes, but learn to adapt with experience, varying the ingredients if need be, depending on the season and the circumstances.

One of my greatest pleasures this year has come from a splendid succession of bulbs, thanks to the inspiring advice of the garden designer Jo Thompson (who offers a brilliant mail-order subscription service at www.colourmygarden.co.uk). I had previously been quite traditional in my choices – Poet's narcissi, English bluebells and wood anemones – but Jo has introduced me to the joy of experimenting with a far wider selection. And despite the greedy squirrels, who treat them like a delicious snack, I'm not giving up on tulips; in particular, 'La Belle

BELOW: A BED OF TULIPS, CAMASSIAS AND ALLIUMS. RIGHT: *SELINUM WALLICHIANUM*



GARDENS

grandiflora 'Dawn to Dusk', otherwise known as catmint, with its aromatic leaves and light-pink blooms. Alongside these, you could try *Valerian officinalis* (if you cut it back in late summer, you should get a second flush of white florets); *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', which has elegant spires of violet petals above grey-green foliage; and *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Spring Dew', topped with slender

spikes of pale-blue flowers. I've planted all of these in generous clumps, rather than lonely samples, mingled with *Aquilegia*; and done the same in my bed of herbs, where the sage is thriving amid chives, mint, rosemary, tarragon and thyme.

The other essentials are hardy geraniums, and you can't go wrong with 'Rozanne', 'Blue Cloud' and 'Summer Skies'; they form drifts of delicate flowers that weave their way through the borders and cover the bare earth. I've also discovered the delights of *Thalictrum* 'Elin' (or meadow rue) and *Selinum wallichianum*; the first is covered in clouds of tiny, amethyst-coloured flowers, the second in soft, milky-white umbers, and together, they create a pleasingly frothy display in late summer. And if you have enough space for it, I highly recommend the soaring *Gaura lindheimeri*, which has elegant stems adorned with pink buds that open into small white flowers; they seem to dance like tiny butterflies in a breeze, and last longer than almost anything else in the garden. In the remaining spaces between these handsome perennials, I've grown my favourite annuals and biennials: forget-me-nots (which, with any luck, will self-seed), hollyhocks, foxgloves, white cosmos and old-fashioned sweet peas that scramble up bamboo wigwams in a south-facing border.

Finally, I think it's important to have plants that will give you pleasure in winter. A garden shouldn't feel like a fair-weather friend, which is why evergreens are so vital. It may seem unimaginative to plant holly and ivy, but just remember how cheering these are at Christmas. Similarly, camellias and hellebores are heartening, as are the heavenly scented daphnes and sweet box (or *Sarcococca confusa*). And in the belief that daydreams should have a place in every garden, I'm hoping to create a glade of silver birches, with ice-white trunks that will shimmer even on the darkest days of January, rising above a magical carpet of snowdrops... □

SEEDS OF CHANGE



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ABOVE: TULIPS AT THE OLD RECTORY. NEAR RIGHT: THE HOUSE'S WILDFLOWER MEADOW, PLANTED WITH ALLIUMS. FAR RIGHT: A MIXED BORDER

