



Corydalis temulifolia
'Chocolate stars'

Wonderful crinkle-edged, rust-coloured foliage in winter becomes almost orange in March. By April, lavender flowers deck the now bronze leaves. The whole plant gradually fades to olive green by June and sits unobtrusively in the garden until November when the first hard frost knocks back the green leaves and reveals the new rusty leaves emerging from below. It is a sight for sore eyes in February. Unlike most corydalis, this one has never seeded itself in my garden, unfortunately.

Height/spread 30cm x 30cm in winter (60cm x 60cm in summer).

Origins China.

Conditions Sun or shade (I have one against a north-facing wall and one on a south-facing slope).

Any good garden soil, probably not too dry.

Hardiness rating RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.

Season Winter – spring.



Derry Watkins is the owner of Special Plants Nursery near Bath

February plants

In the first of her new series, Derry Watkins chooses some of her favourite plants that are at their best in winter

WORDS DERRY WATKINS PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM



Helleborus x ericsmithii
'Bob's Best'

Helleborus ericsmithii 'Bob's Best' is a cross between *H. argutifolius* for its hardiness, *H. lividus* for its leaves and *H. niger* for its flowers. Unlike orientalis hybrids, it does not like rich woodland conditions. It revels in sun and drainage. It has fabulous outward-facing flowers held well above the leaves. They age from creamy white to pink to almost red; because each flower lasts so long all the colours may be visible at once. The evergreen leaves don't need to be cut to the ground – just remove tatty ones. AGM*.

Height 35cm.

Origins Hybrid.

Conditions Full sun or very light shade, good soil, good drainage.

Hardiness rating RHS H4-5, USDA 5a-9b†.

Season Winter – spring.

Sarcococca confusa

One of the joys of winter is coming out of the front door to be knocked sideways by the smell of *Sarcococca* – or sweet box – in full flower. Despite sometimes being called Christmas box, it rarely flowers at Christmas for me; the first flowers usually open on New Year's Day. The little white flowers nestle among the leaves together with shiny, black berries. The plant is slow to get started, but eventually it forms quite a big evergreen mound. Sweet box thrives in shade, where the shiny, deep-green leaves seem to reflect the light. AGM.

Height/spread 2m x 2m.

Origins China.

Conditions Shade, even if it's dry shade, in any soil.

Hardiness rating RHS H5, USDA 6a-9b.

Season Winter.



Chionochloa rubra

My favourite grass every month of the year, but I notice it more in February because the rest of the world looks so dreary. The fine, bronze leaves fountain up and out, sweeping the ground gracefully around the outer edge (don't plant it too near a path as you can trip yourself up). It shimmers as it moves, catching the light, especially the low rays of the winter sun. AGM.

Height/spread 1m x 1m.

Origins New Zealand (called red tussock grass there, a bit of a misnomer, although plants from seed do vary in colour).

Conditions Full sun and good drainage, in any good garden soil.

Hardiness rating RHS H7, USDA 8a. Has thrived in my Cotswold garden for more than 12 years, including through -15°C.

Season All year round.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society †Hardiness ratings given where available



Trachelospermum asiaticum
Asiatic jasmine is an evergreen climber suitable for a south- or west-facing wall. The neat, shiny leaves are attractive all year round, but as winter draws in and the nights get colder, occasional leaves turn bright red just in time for Christmas. *T. asiaticum* has small but fragrant cream-coloured, pinwheel flowers that appear in summer. The plant takes two or three years to settle down and then suddenly it starts to grow. This climber wants to cover my house, but fortunately it can be clipped hard. AGM.

Height/spread 4-8m x 4-8m.
Origins Japan and Korea.
Conditions Sunny south- or west-facing wall, any well-drained soil.
Hardiness rating RHS H4, USDA 7a-9b.
Season Summer – winter.



Aponogeton distachyos
The enchanting white flowers of this water hawthorn, with a delicate almond scent, poke out above simple leaves that float flat on the surface of our pond. In South Africa, where it comes from, it is grown as a crop in flooded fields. The flowers are sold by the bagful and used to make 'water-bloometje stew'. When I came back from South Africa in 1996 my husband had planted water hawthorn in our new pond. I thought the plants would never survive the winter but they are still there, in flower most of the year.

Height/spread 10cm x 1m.
Origins South Africa.
Conditions Likes 30-45cm of water, full sun or light shade.
Hardiness rating RHS H3-4, USDA 6a-10b, (less hardy in shallow water).
Season All year round.

Daphne bholua
'Jacqueline Postill'

A slightly rangy, semi-evergreen shrub that's incredibly fragrant and very early to bloom, it fades into the background until February when your nose sends you scurrying to find fat little clusters of perfect pink and white flowers, nestling demurely at the base of the leaves, spilling over with voluptuous scent. Try to find a sheltered site so the fragrance is not blown away. Known as the Nepalese paper plant, the bark makes extremely fine lightweight, but tough, paper traditionally used for Buddhist sacred texts.

Height/spread 2.5m x 1.5m.
Origins Nepal.
Conditions Full sun or light shade, good soil, good drainage but not dry.
Hardiness rating RHS H4, USDA 7a-9b.
Season Late winter.



Arum italicum 'Marmoratum'
This arum's big, arrow-shaped, glossy leaves, heavily veined with white, emerge in October. They edge our curving path, lighting the way through the woods all winter, impervious to snow and ice. In spring a few rather floppy pale green spathes appear, then the whole plant dies back and disappears in May. In autumn the beautiful leaves return, sometimes with a bonus of fat stalks of bright-red berries. They tend to berry best in sun, but have bigger leaves in shade. All parts of the plant are poisonous. AGM.

Height/spread 50cm x 50cm.
Origins Europe.
Conditions Sun or shade, any good soil, not too dry, very deep rooted, may self sow.
Hardiness rating RHS H6, USDA 6a-9b.
Season Autumn – spring.

Ulmus x hollandica
'Jacqueline Hillier'

A dwarf elm tree which is said not to be susceptible to Dutch elm disease because the beetles fly at a height of about 4.5m and it never gets that tall. I hope that is so, because this tree is wonderful in the garden. It grows like a bonsai, each of its twisted branches ending in sprays of neatly fish-boned twigs, best seen against a winter sky. The small, neat, serrated leaves form a dense shrub but it responds well to being opened out by careful pruning to reveal its miniature tree-like structure.

Height/spread 3m x 3m.
Origins Hybrid between *U. glabra* and *U. minor*.
Conditions Full sun or light shade.
Hardiness rating RHS H6, USDA 5a-8b.
Season All year round.



Parrotia persica

I planted a *Parrotia persica*, or Persian ironwood, by my front steps intending to walk under its down-sweeping branches one day. I'm already in love with its sinuous limbs of lustrous grey bark, its leaves, which turn butter yellow for me – but can turn red, orange and purple on acid soils – and above all its little, ruby-red flowers, which I never noticed until I had to walk close by it every day. They look like tiny witch hazel flowers and, when covered in snow, remind me of drops of blood.

Height/spread 4-8m x 4-8m.
Origins Iran.
Conditions Tough and obliging. Tolerant of almost any conditions, sun or light shade, acid or alkaline, exposed or sheltered.
Hardiness rating RHS H5, USDA 4a-8b.
Season Autumn – winter.



Places to visit

Derry shares some of her favourite places to see plants at their best.

Rousham is perhaps every garden designer's favourite garden. Go in February when the bones are all you see and the light is soft. Beauty can come from just leaves, water and stone. Who needs flowers? Garden open daily. Rousham House & Garden, Steeple Aston, Bicester, Oxfordshire OX25 4QU. Tel 01869 347110, rousham.org.
Ashwoods Nursery is an exquisitely kept nursery



The gardens of Rousham House

near Birmingham. Go in February to find the best hellebores and hepaticas; hundreds will be in bloom and you can choose the exact flower you want. While you are there get some *Anemone pavoninas* as well; they won't be in flower yet but every one is beautiful. Nursery open daily except 25-26 December. Lower Lane, Ashwood, Kingswinford,

West Midlands DY6 0AE. Tel 01384 401996, ashwoodnurseries.com.
For massed displays of snowdrops visit **Colesbourne Park** and **Painswick Rococo Gardens**. At Colesbourne you can see large groups of named snowdrops and there are open days each February and March. Colesbourne, near Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL53 9NP. Tel 01242 870567, colesbournegardens.org.uk.

Painswick has one of the largest naturalistic plantings of snowdrops in the country. Open 10 January to end of October. Painswick, Gloucestershire GL6 6TH. Tel 01452 813204, rococogarden.org.uk.
The National Botanic Garden of Wales is a great place to visit at any time of the year, but in February when the weather is bad you can spend the day in the



National Botanic Garden of Wales

giant Mediterranean greenhouse and imagine you are in the South of France. It is organised geographically so you can see South African or Californian plants in the context of other plants that they grow with. Open daily except 24-25 December. National Botanic Garden of Wales, Llanarthne, Carmarthenshire SA32 8HN. Tel 01558 668768, gardenofwales.org.uk.