November plants

Derry Watkins chooses some of her favourite plants that are sure to give your garden one last blast of late-season colour

**Viburnum x bodnantense 'Dawn'**
An old, cottage garden favourite, one of the earliest shrubs to bloom. Tough as old boots, it is one of the plants that survives and even thrives in abandoned gardens, gradually spreading. Boring in summer, but worth having in a neglected corner so you can pick a few sprigs to bring into the house in winter. The pale-pink flowers are borne on naked stems in mild spells throughout the winter. The intensely sweet spicy fragrance promises spring is on the way as early as November. AGM*.

**Height** 3m.
**Growing conditions** Sun or part shade.
**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 5b.
**Origin** Hybrid developed at Bodnant garden 1934–35.
**Season of Interest** November – March.

**Hydrangea macrophylla 'Merveille Sanguine'**
As summer turns to autumn, the leaves of 'Merveille Sanguine' gradually turn purple, setting off the dusky, deep purple-pink flowers to perfection. On acid soils the flowers are positively violet. I am not usually a hydrangea lover, but this one is an irresistible drama queen. Hydrangeas like good soil, which does not dry out, and a bit of shade and shelter, but don’t give ‘Merveille Sanguine’ too much shade or the leaves will revert to green. Morning sun is usually best. The name translates perfectly – bloody marvellous!.

**Height** 1.5m.
**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade.
**Hardiness** USDA 7.
**Origin** Japan.
**Season of Interest** July – November.

**Polygala africana**
Polygalas are tender evergreen shrubs from South Africa. The best make brilliant conservatory plants where they can bloom all year. Outdoors in a sheltered sunny position, perhaps against a wall, they will bloom for six months. A hard winter will see them off, but even one summer of the pretty pea-like flowers is worth it. Each flower has a tiny white beard like the closely related English wild flower, milkwort. Polygala ‘Africana’ has a particularly good compact habit, blue-grey leaves and lots of flower.

**Height** 80cm.
**Growing conditions** Sun, good drainage and shelter from hard frosts.
**Hardiness** USDA 9.
**Origin** South Africa.
**Season of Interest** Year round in a conservatory. June – November outdoors.

**Miscanthus sinensis ‘Malepartus’**
Miscanthus is a wonderful, very upright grass. It blooms in late summer with silky, slender-fingered flower spikes that gradually fluff out and stand all winter. The flowers of ‘Malepartus’ are dark red for a month then fade to silver and finally gold all winter. Books tell you to cut the plants down in March when you see new growth, but I can’t be bothered. The skeletal dead flowers stay until almost July above the new green growth. I used ‘Malepartus’ to make a grass hedge between the grass of the orchard and the grass of the field.

**Height** 1.8–2.1m.
**Growing conditions** Sun, any soil.
**Hardiness** USDA 5.
**Origin** East Asia.
**Season of Interest** August – April.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.
**Ruscus aculeatus** *John Redmond*

*Ruscus aculeatus* will grow where almost nothing else will, nesting in dark, dry shade among dense tree roots. It grows very slowly, but it grows. And it is evergreen. The leaves, which are really flattened stems, are so tough and spiny they were used for scrubbing butchers’ blocks, hence the common name of butcher’s broom. Heminaphrodite flowers, such as this, and females with a nearby mate, produce purple-black foliage. Its naturally tidy habit makes it a good substitute for large box balls, if lightly clipped to shape in spring. The new leaves emerge pale, lime-green, becoming positively fine, velvety hairs, becoming positively lavender-pink in summer, cut it hard back and it will quickly re-cover itself in its dense, compact mound of shining, purple-black foliage. AGM.

**Height** 60cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun or dry shade. Any soil.

**Hardiness** RHS H5, USDA 7.

**Origin** Brazil.

**Season of interest** Year round.

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**Pittosporum tenuifolium** *Tom Thumb*

A slow-growing evergreen shrub making a dense, compact mound of shining, purple-black foliage. Its naturally tidy habit makes it a good substitute for large box balls, if lightly clipped to shape in spring. The new leaves emerge pale, lime-green, becoming positively fine, velvety hairs, becoming positively lavender-pink in summer, cut it hard back and it will quickly re-cover itself in its dense, compact mound of shining, purple-black foliage. AGM.

**Height** 5m.

**Growing conditions** Sun. Hardiness USDA 7a-9b.

**Origin** South Africa.

**Season of interest** Year round.

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**Heptacodium miconioides**

Discovered in China in 1908 but not introduced into cultivation until 1980, *Heptacodium* is a wonderful small tree or large shrub. It is beautiful every month of the year. In winter its peeling bark and elegant silhouette make it stand out. In spring the pairs of deeply veined leaves start to grow, eventually meeting at the tips to make a circle. The circles line up so you can run your arm up the branch through a series of bracelets. Clusters of fragrant, white flowers appear in September, followed by rose bracts. Truly a tree for all seasons. AGM.

**Height** 4-8m.

**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade. Hardiness RHS H4, USDA 5.

**Origin** China.

**Season of interest** Year round.

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**Eryngium deppeanum**

If a plant could kick and bite and scratch, it would be *Eryngium deppeanum*. Reminiscent of some vicious sea creature with claws at the ready, each leaf is armed with double, forward-facing spines. Chancunial gloves would be useful for pulling out old leaves and flower spikes. Nonetheless I love it. In autumn it has clusters of tight, navy-blue flower heads, and its wheels of shiny, evergreen leaves look stylish all year. Coming from Mexico, it needs good drainage to survive an English winter.

**Height** 30cm (leaves), 60cm (flowers).

**Growing conditions** Sun, very good drainage, poor soil.

**Hardiness** USDA 7.

**Origin** Mexico.

**Season of interest** Year round.

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**Cambridge University Botanic Garden**

Cambridge University Botanic Gardens is home to a rock garden and alpine house, both of which are wonderful places all year round. And while you’re there, don’t forget to walk the chronological bed – it’s astonishing what one doesn’t know about when plants were introduced. Even weird and not a British native; the winter garden is at its best from November to March, full of ideas for winter interest in your own garden. 1 Brookside Avenue, Cambridge CB2 1JE. Tel: 01223 336260 botanical.cam.ac.uk

**The Eden Project** in Cornwall has become an all-year fantastic. And when the weather turns wintry, what better place to be than a tropical room? Like giant soap bubbles set in an old stone-clay quarry, the biomes allow you to wander among beautiful plants no matter what the weather throws at you. In summer the outdoor planting is also spectacularly good. Bodelva, Cornwla PL24 2SG. edenproject.com

**Stourhead** was described by one magazine as a ‘grotto opened, way back in the 1740s, as “a living work of art”. Almost 300 years later it is still succeed in taking away the breath of even the most cynical. Well known for its beautiful central lake surrounded by classical temples, mystical grottoes, and rare and exotic trees, at this time of year it’s simply a fabulous place to take a long walk and blow away autumnal cobwebs. Near Mere, Wiltshire BA12 6QF. Tel: 01249 841252 nationaltrust.org.uk/stourhead

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**Dig in plantsman’s favourites**

*Geranium pulchrum*

An evergreen sub-shrub, which I grow as much for its leaves as for its flowers. The grey-green leaves are covered in fine, velvety hairs, becoming positively furry in winter when they look like they are covered in frost. The mauve-pink flowers in summer are the icing on the cake. If it starts to look straggly in summer, cut it hard back and it will quickly re-cover itself in its handsome foliage. More tolerant of damp than most geraniums, it is handy for me in all but the very harshest winters here in Wiltshire.

**Height** 50cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun. Hardiness USDA 7a-9b.

**Origin** South Africa.

**Season of interest** Year round.

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**Places to visit**

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

**Bodnant Garden** in the far corner of North Wales is one of the great British gardens. Gardened by two generations of keen plant collectors, it has 80 acres of unusual trees and shrubs, wonderful views of Snowdonia, and now a new Winter Garden. Tal-y-cafn, Conwy, LL28 5RE. Tel 01492 860460 nationaltrust.org.uk/bodnant/