



Grumpy old man

The price of plants prompts Sir Roddy to find ways of cutting back in the garden

NOT EVERY day in January beckons us out into the garden, but then the same could be said for last August. As you sit in front of the fire in your long johns, close your eyes and dream of warm, sunny days and plan well ahead armed with plant and seed catalogues – as many as you can lay your hands on.

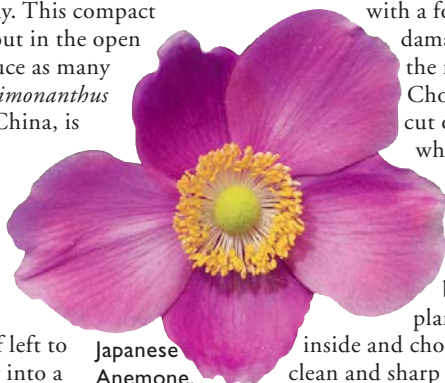
One of my biggest failures in 2009 were my tomatoes which, as they were beginning to ripen, were hit by the dreaded Tomato Blight which succeeds in first discolouring the foliage followed by browning and hardening of the fruits. The whole lot had to be thrown onto the bonfire. Keen not to have a repeat performance I was attracted to see something that Suttons are offering, a range of grafted vegetable plants including tomatoes. These are called 'Turbo' tomatoes consisting of some of the best varieties which have been grafted on to very vigorous rootstocks. The result is larger, more vigorous plants which have a greater resistance to pests and diseases. This sounds worth a try.

It seems unlikely that any plant is capable of producing scent in the garden during the depths of winter in this country, but there are quite a few. If you have a spare space up against a wall or fence you will find a bushy honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*) more than rewarding. Its small creamy white flowers have a strong scent that will make you smile on the greyest day. This compact shrub can also be planted out in the open where it tends not to produce as many flowers. 'Wintersweet' (*Chimonanthus praecox*), all the way from China, is similarly generous with its scent. The variety 'Grandiflorus' has larger yellow flowers with a maroon inside. The golden yellow, spidery flowers of Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*) are also a delight. If left to its own devices it will grow into a large, untidy shrub although it can be standardised with judicious pruning over a number of years to form a neat, small tree. If you are planning a new garden try to include at least one of these. The winter months are not always catered to. Being a grumpy old man, I am forever complaining



Oriental Poppy.

(sometimes out loud in shops) at the price of everything these days. Plants are no exception and so it is in our interests to find ways of cutting back in the garden, if you will excuse the pun. January is the perfect month for taking root cuttings from many herbaceous perennials like Echinops (Globe Thistle), *Papaver orientale* (Oriental Poppy) and *Anemone japonica* (Japanese Anemone). They can all be lifted gently with a fork with as little damage as possible to the root system. Choose nice fat roots, cut off at source, which you then cut up into two inch (5cm) lengths, each with the potential of becoming a new plant. Take the roots inside and chop them with a clean and sharp knife, and lay them out the right way up, remembering that the new shoots will grow from the end of the root cutting that was nearest to the parent plant. Just to play safe, cut the end nearest to the plant straight and the other at a slant. You will then know to push the slanted end into the compost first. Choose



Japanese Anemone.

a sandy compost for root cuttings with the flat end showing at the same level as the compost surface in pots or deep trays, that should be put into an unheated greenhouse, cold frame or a sheltered corner. Come late spring new shoots will appear and come early summer the young plants can be established outside.

If you are stuck for ideas for decorative plants for the north side of your house where there is little sun except in mid-summer, you can't really do better than to have hostas in large pots. Caviar to molluscs, I have given up growing these beauties out in the open where it is so much more difficult to keep these slimy creatures that leave holes all over the leaves away. In any case they do look particularly handsome in containers; in fact they are almost made for them. I have the same hostas growing in the same pots that I planted 15 years ago: they do not mind being pot-bound. If you put the pots on terracotta feet (or stones) to raise them off the ground and place a copper band around each pot (molluscs hate copper) you will sleep more soundly knowing that you have made life as difficult as you can for these nocturnal visitors. I have had great success with two hosta varieties in pots, namely 'June' and 'Frances Williams'. ■