



Present danger

As most of the garden settles into a state of restful melancholy, there are a few plants that are stirring themselves towards an unseasonal flamboyance. In a shady area, the fat buds of a camellia are starting to reveal glimpses of bright-red petals. This teasing will continue as reliably as any Advent calendar until Christmas, when the whole shrub will be aglow with scarlet flowers. It never disappoints, even blooming on those rare occasions when we do have snow at Christmas.

The camellia was a gift and not something I would have chosen for myself. As do all unsolicited plants, it immediately made me anxious: I didn't know where to plant it and was convinced that it would not like my thin, chalky soil. Happily, I was wrong. The shrub is now 8ft tall and in rude health. It arrived with no label, but a gardener who knows more about camellias than I ever will has confidently pronounced that it is a cultivar of *Camellia x vernalis*.

All camellias were once considered tender plants and, even long after nurseries realised that most were hardy in Britain, *Camellia x vernalis* often came with advice to protect it during cold weather. Mine has stood up to the very worst winters with no mollycoddling. Although I do not grow it myself, *C. sasanqua* is also starting to flower. There are many cultivars, all of which have paler, flimsier flowers than my plant. I have seen healthy specimens



Glorious gift: the autumn-flowering *Cyclamen hederifolium* creates an uplifting sight worth sharing

flowering in midwinter in a windswept, exposed Sussex garden.

Not all plant gifts I have received have had the same success as my camellia. After admiring a group of *cimicifuga* in a garden I was visiting and complimenting the owner on how magnificent they were, I received a beautifully wrapped and carefully packed parcel from a swanky nursery that contained seven *cimicifugas*. It was an unexpected and generous gift that immediately made my heart sink: as with the camellia, I knew that on my dry soil I would struggle to grow them and, this time, I was right. The plants I had admired were magnificent 6ft-tall spires of pale-pink flowers over a froth of lacy foliage; in my garden, they were a sorry sight with a few stunted flowers and desiccated leaves. My friend had not learned that the plants we applaud most in other gardens

are usually the very ones that we know we cannot grow ourselves.

The glory of British gardens has been built, to a great extent, on the generosity of gardeners and nurserymen offering plants to each other and exchanging rarities. But this is gift-giving between consenting gardeners, who know exactly what they are getting. Great gardens are not made by trying to fit unasked-for plants into a carefully thought-out planting scheme. Give me—and,

‘Give me secateurs, not *cimicifuga*’

I suspect, most gardeners—secateurs, warm socks or kneeling pads, but not a plant for which I haven't asked. And never give a gardener a tree, not even to celebrate a special birthday or anniversary. I know a small London garden where a sad winter-flowering cherry, *Prunus x subhirtella*, struggles to get anywhere close to the majestic specimen it ought to be. The owners say they live with it because it was a present from a close friend. Giving a gardener the surprise present of a tree is akin to offering a kitten or a puppy. A tree is also not just for Christmas.

This said, I do appreciate the urge to share plants. I mostly manage to resist it, but, this winter, I am ignoring my own advice and preparing a few plants as presents. The autumn-flowering cyclamen, *Cyclamen hederifolium*, have been particularly impressive this year and cloak all parts of the garden, sunny and shady, and even inhospitable places, such as around the walnut trees and on the banks of the stream. From a handful of tubers planted 30 years ago, there are now hundreds of seedlings, spread around the garden by industrious ants, attracted to the sweet sticky coating of the seeds. The plants are a glorious sight and never fail to lift my spirits, so, of course, I want loved ones to have the same experience in their own gardens. I will be digging up tubers and distributing them to friends. But only to those who I know will want them, have space in their garden for them and who will unwrap the present with pleasure. And, knowing that it is a welcome gift, it is a pleasure I will share. 🌹

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Next week Bay

Horticultural aide-mémoire Harvest parsnips



The parsnip is not a universal favourite, but it tops my list of winter vegetables. Now that temperatures are falling, it tastes all the better, as frost converts the starch to sugar. Dispose of the ugly tops to the compost heap and lift each root with caution. If the soil is heavy, lift half the crop in one go, wash the roots off and store them in boxes of sand in a dark shed or cellar. They are perfectly hardy and will keep for a while, but the best solution is to keep eating them. They are a British institution. **SCD**