

DECEMBER PLANTS

This month Fleur suggests some fabulous shrubs and trees with stunning structure, as well as bright, flowering plants that save their best for last

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Fleur van Zonneveld
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De Kleine Plantage.
dekleineplantage.nl

EUONYMUS FORTUNEI 'WOLONG GHOST'

Discovered by the plantsman and plant collector Dan Hinkley in the Wolong National Nature Reserve in Sichuan, China, this evergreen groundcover has narrow, dark-green leaves that are marked with silvery white veins and looks a little like a ghostly tinted *Vinca minor*. Over time, it will form a carpet and climb in other plants and can also be trained up a support. Fortunately, however, it's not as invasive as ivy. It works well when combined with small-leaved hostas and hellebores. AGM*.

Height 40cm.
Origin China.
Conditions Moist but well-drained soil; full sun to full shade.
Hardiness RHS H5, USDA 5a-10b†.
Season of interest Year round.



BIDENS AUREA 'STARLIGHT'

Over the summer we've experimented with a number of bright-orange bidens and have only just recovered from the overwhelming bloom of *Bidens triplinervia* 'Hawaiian Flare Orange Yellow Brush'. This white cultivar from the German firm Kientzler is longer flowering and even more exuberant than some of the orange bidens. It is a good filler for the front edge of the border, where the fresh green of its fine leaves and pretty little flowers merge well with the winter colour palette, but it is sensitive to frost, so perhaps better grown in a pot so you can more easily bring it inside when temperatures drop.

Height 30cm.
Origin Mexico.
Conditions Well-drained soil; full sun.
Hardiness RHS H3.
Season of interest Summer to winter.



SALIX ALBA VAR. *VITELLINA* 'BRITZENSIS'

Many gardeners choose evergreen shrubs in winter over deciduous trees with their bare branches, but we love the branches of this willow. After the leaves have fallen and temperatures dropped, its branches take on a beautiful orange that creates a wonderful contrast against the winter sky whether blue or grey. In spring, when the twigs begin to shoot, the branches turn green again. As perennial growers we spend a lot of time looking groundward, so at this time of year, when there is so little flower and foliage to see, it's good to have an excuse to raise our eyes.

Height 5m (pollarded).
Origin Europe.
Conditions Moist but well-drained soil; full sun.
Hardiness RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.
Season of interest Winter.

SOLIDAGO RUGOSA 'FIREWORKS'

With its bright-yellow flowers that are borne in dense, plume-like panicles on the ends of elegantly arching stems, this looks like a firework firing off in several directions. It's an excellent addition to prairie-style planting schemes, contrasting well with grasses and asters, but it also makes a wonderful cut flower. It's a strong grower, but not invasive, and flowers from late summer through to late autumn. By December it has finished flowering but the stems create a strong winter silhouette. AGM.

Height 1.4m.
Origin Garden origin (species North America).
Conditions Well-drained soil; full sun and part shade.
Hardiness RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.
Season of interest Autumn to winter.



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

BRASSICA OLERACEA
'DAZZLING BLUE'

Dark-leaved kales, such as the popular 'Nero di Toscana', are now often used as much in the flower border as the vegetable garden. This one has beautiful blue-green leaves with red veins and the intensity of the colour increases in cold weather. It even withstands frost. In spring it blooms abundantly with soft yellow flowers, then after flowering the following May it is over, in time to grow new plants from seeds for the new season. It is also a good plant for attracting pollinating insects.

Height 90cm.

Origin Garden origin (species coastal areas of southern and western Europe).

Conditions Moist but well-drained soil; full sun.

Hardiness RHS H5, USDA 2a-11.

Season of interest Year round.



CAREX NIGRA 'ON-LINE'

This small, clump-forming sedge has variegated grey-green leaves with a narrow golden edge that make it stand out when used between other plants. Its leaves look beautiful right up until winter when the gold-coloured hue becomes more intense. Between April and June it blooms with dark-brown spikes. Perfect for pots, it also a great groundcover for larger surfaces, without being too invasive. Best of all, this *Carex* is very resistant to frost and will grow in wet soil.

Height 30cm.

Origin Garden origin (species Europe, Asia, America).

Conditions Moist, humus-rich soil; full sun to part shade.

Hardiness RHS H7.

Season of interest Summer to winter.

SALVIA CONFERTIFLORA

Salvia confertiflora blooms until the beginning of the winter, although it's not hardy so you'll need to bring it inside by December. But placed in an orangery, this salvia just keeps on flowering. It offers an abundance of short, hairy, reddish-brown flowers with a hint of orange held on very long, narrow, unbranched flower stems. It can become rather woody, but if you prune it back in autumn you can force it to produce more shoots, otherwise it will be standing on very long legs. The large leaves are matt dark green and wrinkled and smell spicy. The plant is attractive to bees and butterflies.

Height 1.5m.

Origin Brazil.

Conditions Well-drained soil; full sun.

Hardiness RHS H2.

Season of interest Summer to winter.



PLACES TO VISIT

Recommended places to see seasonal plants at their best both in Europe and the UK

The Wadden Islands form a long archipelago in the North Sea that stretches from the Netherlands to Denmark. Five of the inhabited islands lie off the Dutch coast and the smallest of these is **Schiermonnikoog**. The island is rich in fauna and flora, and in 1989 was designated a National Park. Although it's just nine miles long and two miles wide, the

island includes a vast range of different habitats, including forests, saline grasslands, dunes, mudflats and polders – all filled with flowers. As you'd expect it's especially rich in coastal plants, such as sea-buckthorn, sea lavender, sea wormwood and sea aster as well as many different types of lichens and mushrooms. The island is also home to thousands

of birds, including barnacle geese, spoonbills and hen harriers, making Schiermonnikoog a fabulous destination for bird lovers as much as gardeners. The island is mainly car free, and there are several places to stay to give you time to enjoy all it has to offer. In low winter light the landscape of sandbanks, marshes, and the endless beach with

unspoilt views takes on a desolate beauty. Reeweg 5, 9166 PW, Schiermonnikoog, the Netherlands. Tel +31 (0)519 53 12 33, vvschiermonnikoog.nl

The Netherlands' oldest botanical garden is **Hortus Botanicus Leiden**, which dates back to the 1590s. It was here that the botanist Carolus Clusius (1526-1609) bred the first large collection of that most ▷



BEGONIA SCHARFFIANA

An incredible but tender begonia that we leave out on the terrace until quite late in the year. However, it is not at all hardy so when temperatures fall below 10°C, you'll need to bring it inside and place it in the greenhouse or in a cool room. Its large and hairy matt green leaves have purple-red backs and look a little like elephant ears. Above these leaves, hairy and fleshy stems bend under the weight of long bunches of large, pinkish-white and red hairy flowers that bloom from July through to early December. It is a strong and disease-resistant begonia that does well in large pots.

Height 1.2m.

Origin Brazil.

Conditions Warm humid soil; part shade.

Hardiness RHS H1C, USDA 10a-11.

Season of interest Summer to winter.

POLYSTICHUM SETIFERUM 'DAHLEM'

A fairly recent selection of the, erect growing form of the soft shield fern that was discovered at Dahlem Botanical Garden in Berlin. It's a very decorative fern with fresh, delicate and finely serrated leaves and is an excellent groundcover for growing beneath shrubs and trees. Like many polystichums it makes bulbils along the midrib. When the fronds are anchored to the soil, the bulbils start to root, propagating new ferns. It is close to the form of 'Divisilobum' and in some classifications falls within that group.

Height 70cm.

Origin Garden origin (species Europe).

Conditions Moist but well-drained soil; part to full shade.

Hardiness RHS H7, USDA 6a-8b.

Season of interest Year round.



CARPINUS BETULUS

Unlike beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), which can prove difficult on wet clay soils, hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) is tolerant of most soils, and also resistant to sea winds. Unlike beech, which holds on to its leaves throughout winter, hornbeam leaves fall in autumn to create a most beautiful filigree branch silhouette for a winter hedge. It will form precisely the type of silhouette you want in winter, especially if it's given a good prune in late summer. And you don't have to worry about clearing up leaves in spring, as by then the leaves have already gone. AGM.

Height 10m.

Origin Europe, Turkey, Iran.

Conditions Moist but well-drained soil; full sun, part shade.

Hardiness RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

Season of interest Year round.

▷ iconic of Dutch flowers, the tulip. You can get an idea of what the garden was like when Clusius became its first director in 1594, from the Clusius Garden, which has been renovated with new plants. But beyond this first garden there is much more to explore including tropical glasshouses, a large systematic garden, an arboretum and a Japanese

garden that displays the links the garden has to the plant collector Philipp Franz von Siebold, who in the 19th century introduced more than 700 new plants to Europe from Japan. Open 10am-4pm, €7.50. Rapenburg 73, 2311 GJ Leiden, the Netherlands. Tel +31 (0)71 527 5144 hortusleiden.nl/en

One of our favourite winter gardens in the UK is

that of **Polesden Lacey** in Surrey. Created by the late rose expert Graham Stuart Thomas (1909-2003), the garden is hidden away behind the gardener's cottage in a quiet corner of the formal gardens, and is centred around three Persian ironwoods (*Parrotia persica*) linked by winter aconites. It also features winter shrubs, including viburnum and sweet box

and other fragrant plants, as well as collections of snowdrops and colourful hellebores. Great Bookham, nr Dorking, Surrey RH5 6BD. Tel 01372 452048, nationaltrust.org.uk

In winter it's sometimes nice to escape the wind and the rain for the warmth of a glasshouse. So, if you haven't yet visited the restored Temperate House at the **Royal Botanic**

Gardens, Kew, then a cold, winter day is your perfect excuse. The restoration, which took five years to complete, was the biggest renovation project in Kew's history and involved replacing thousands of panes of glass and repairing the intricate ironwork and paved flooring. Open daily 10am-3.30pm. Kew, Richmond, London TW9 3AE. kew.org