



LOOK AHEAD

Plant now for a summer garden to delight all the senses, says *Randle Siddeley*

Our gradual return to 'normal' feels all the better for coinciding with the arrival of spring, which can't fail to reawaken optimism about the summer ahead. At a time when we're tentatively starting to celebrate our freedom from the pandemic's restrictions, I'm planning a garden to delight my senses on every level, thinking about taste, sound and smell, as much as about what it's going to look like. So I'm hoping for a fragrant garden full of trees whispering in the breeze and abundant in delicious vegetables.

Start with at least one stunning tree. Regular readers will know I like gardens to perform all year round and judge them by what they look like in the winter. A good all-season tree is the *Betula utilis* 'Nepalese Orange', a Himalayan birch with a vivid orange and cream peeling bark. It has pretty yellow catkins in spring and bright autumn leaves, providing visual drama throughout the year, especially if planted against a backdrop of dark, forest green. The river birch or *Betula nigra* has pinkish

brown papery bark that exfoliates to reveal a creamy white trunk and won't fail to delight in every season, starting with its spring catkins that become vibrant, lime green leaves, darkening as summer progresses and mellowing to butter yellow in autumn.

I use Deepdale Trees, which stocks superb specimens ready planted in containers so you can buy all year round (deepdale-trees.co.uk). The birches start between four and six metres in height and grow up to 20 metres so it's critical you pick a generous spot in your garden. But these trees are worth it – I count them amongst my closest friends, so if you have a big garden, I'd advise planting three.



For gorgeous flowering shrubs that deliver bright autumn berries, you can't go wrong with *Viburnum betulifolium*, with spectacular yellow leaves and clusters of scarlet berries, fat as redcurrants. These will grow up to three metres. At half the height is the *Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Snow Queen' and for ground cover go for *quercifolia* 'Munchkin' that grows up to about 80 cms and has a large oak-type leaf and exquisite



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Jasmine provides a decorative and sweet-smelling facade; an arrangement of Sarah Raven's New Giants sweet peas; Suttons mushroom kit; garden inspiration; juicy plum tomatoes; the pinkish brown bark of a river birch

white-pink flowers. It's perfect for patio containers, too.

Turning to taste, March is the time to get your hands into the earth of your allotment or garden and start digging in your vegetables. Order online from Suttons, a formidable and renowned grower of seeds (suttons.co.uk). For a visual and literal vegetable feast I'm going for both colour and taste and growing purple sprouting broccoli, vitamin-rich kale, Romanesco pointy cauliflowers, dwarf French beans, mangetouts, fleshy golden Burpees beetroots, Purple Haze carrots and the striped Italian Courcourzelle courgettes with their sweet nutty flavour and flowers that can be used in a multiple of delicious ways. I avoid fat and gold onions, preferring the smaller, red Kamal variety for its sweet, intense flavour. I use a chopped layer of them in the pan under a chicken as they make gratifyingly good gravy. For salads I'm growing Japanese knobly Zipangu cucumbers, butterhead lettuce or lollo rosso with its crispy, purple leaf. I'll plant plum or cherry tomatoes and avoid big tasteless ones. Finally, I'll be firing up my taste buds with multi-coloured sweet peppers and some fearsome Habanero chillies. If you only have a window box, Suttons sells mushroom kits from just £14.99, great fun for children who can pick their own fast-growing oyster, shiitake or chestnut mushrooms straight from the windowsill.

I love red, pink and white roses and buy from Harkness, a reliable supplier with excellent service (roses.co.uk). My three favourites are Darcey Bussell for a proper, deep crimson rose, Fantin-Latour for a cupped shell pink rose that then relaxes into full-petalled splendour and Rosa Boule de Neige, for creamy clusters of silky, camellia-like flowers.

There is nothing more lovely than a warm summer evening, redolent with the scent of jasmine and roses and no English summer is complete without vases tumbling with sweet peas wafting clouds of garden fragrance into the house. Sarah Raven is the undisputed queen of sweet peas and she'll dispatch them ready to put into the ground from March, so start ordering now (sarahraven.com). Her sweet peas are strong, highly scented and super-sized, all pre-trialled in her garden. I love her lusciously coloured, long-stemmed New Giants collection that tower over others in a vase, and the Full on Fragrance and Clouds of Scent Collections. For the strongest smelling sweet pea, try the purple and magenta Matucana, which she rates as ten out of ten for unrivalled, intense scent. You can also buy specially formulated sweet pea fertilizer and decorative obelisks or maypoles in wood or metal.

As we ease out of our winter of discontent, it's delightful to be planting a garden that will soon burst into scented glory, yielding up a colourful, mouth-watering variety of vegetables and flowers.

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