



HOW TO LIVE

A meditation on the garden in winter

Poetic depictions of nature in the coldest months inspire the writer Daisy Garnett's essay on this time of rest for gardeners



The Jinny Blom designed garden Chalkland Farm in winter

BY DAISY GARNETT
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*I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.*

You probably know Thomas Hardy's poem, *'The Darkling Thrush'*, but no matter how much I read it, it's new every time. The opening verse is straightforward, pretty spare, and yet so filled with magic energy that it conjures Hardy vividly for me. There he is - I could tell you what he's wearing if you asked - leaning on that gate in the dead of winter.

Winter's dregs: is there any time worse? No, there is not. That bit between the wind-down of autumn when the shock of the cold can feel enlivening, and the onset of a spring that never seems to arrive - that's a deathly time of year. Darkness. Stillness. The seemingly frightening absence of Mother Nature, so insistently present in the garden throughout the rest of the year.

As a human I dread it. But as a gardener? Secretly, I long for it - just a bit. I live in London and while my garden is generous by city standards, it's basically a handkerchief of earth. You can't have separate sections, or outside 'rooms' if you live in London and you're not the Queen. No swathes of woodland, or dedicated space for exotics. No cutting garden or vegetable patch. No orchard, or water garden, or topiary colonnades. No wild meadow. In my garden at least, all those things are on top of one another. Stuffed and layered into four borders as wide as I can get away with, with a dark bit at the bottom where the trees from the park beyond our fence provide shade and drama.

I love it. What gardener doesn't love their patch? I make mine work hard and for ten months of every year I'm amazed - like mouth-agog-flummoxed - that the same little strips of earth roll out snowdrops, then aconites and hyacinths, Iris reticulata, muscari and fritillaria. Narcissi. Tulips. Alliums. Forget-me-knots. Bluebells. This is just for starters. Explosions of peonies and roses and clematis and delphiniums follow. A Rosa banksiae and lilac will have heralded them. Loads of other stuff. It keeps coming. Meanwhile, the annuals are sprouting crazily and demanding their time on the stage. The dahlias too. They take over and pretend everything else was just a dry run.

Hydrangeas, mulberries, pears, apples, sunflowers, scabious. Even now, in late November, I'm still picking cosmos and fat, absurdly coloured chrysanthus. My garden is a miracle, I think, from February till December. It's also a diva: needy, needy, needy. I wonder aloud, each year, to the kids and husband, if it would be better if we didn't go on holiday in the summer. The garden, you see.

So winter is when we rest, and god knows we both need the break. I love proper winter gardens with their red stems of dogwood and clever shapes of box and yew, but mine is set on pause. It barely even snows in London these days. Nothing to see round here. Come inside, by the fire. Have a drink.

And then, just as I catch my breath, it starts again: the energy beneath the soil, twitching away. In fact, nothing ever stopped. The 'world', remember, 'is crazier and more of it than we think' (re-read *'Snow'* by Louis MacNeice and swoon). It's like Hardy's Darkling Thrush. The life was in it all the time, just waiting for the exact right moment, whenever that might be, to assert itself against the greys of winter and blast out hope.

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