



SPRING'S HERE - CAN YOU DIG IT?

Winter has been hard on your garden, but now's the time to prepare for warmer months ahead. **Kate Watson-Smyth** offers your step-by-step guide to horticultural happiness

With any luck, by the time you read this, the sun will have poked through the clouds and your thoughts will have turned to spring. Some of you will have looked out at the garden – rather than actually going out there – and realised it is a soggy, overgrown mess. It's time to get the gloves on and sort it out. But where to start?

TIDYING AWAY

Jenny Bowden, a horticultural adviser with the RHS, says: "Start by clearing all the dead leaves. If you want, you can leave some undisturbed in corners for wildlife and can move others to the flower beds, where they will rot down and improve the soil."

So don't panic, it's not necessarily a bad thing if you didn't clear up last autumn. But Bowden says that at the very least make sure you clear leaves off plants or they might rot.

Gather all your leaves into bin liners and they will eventually rot down into compost. Simply punch a couple of holes in the bag, make sure it's a bit damp and then stick it in a quiet spot and forget about it. Bowden says:



(clockwise from above) a living wall from Scotscape; the Solvinden solar powered pendant lamp from the Ikea spring collection; another Scotscape garden; a Solvinden outdoor lamp from Ikea; a Burgon & Ball salad and herb planter; a vertical planter from Burgon & Ball



sowing little and often; as one batch germinates simply sow the next. To get started, have a look at the RHS Grow Your Own web pages: rhs.org.uk.

WHAT ABOUT THE FLOWERS?

If you want to fill the deck or patio with tubs, you will need to put some broken plates in the bottom to help drainage – broken polystyrene or pebbles will do fine. This is where the multi-purpose compost comes in. Then choose from annual bedding plants, which include primulas, primroses and cyclamen. You can buy a whole tray from the garden centre (often in a polystyrene tray) and dot them about the garden.

Mix violas in with your shrubs and grasses. And remember evergreens will add some instant interest. Clematis grow fast but need pruning. Visit the RHS website for tips, but Bowden says few things die from being pruned. "If you prune after the plant has flowered you are unlikely to kill it and afterwards you are giving it time to grow."

USE THE WALLS

If you haven't much horizontal space then go up. Living walls have been seen in urban environments for a while now – the US store Anthropologie created one in its London store, and let's not forget the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Burgon and Ball (burgonandball.com) sell Verti-Plant, a two-pack set of planters, which will take 16 plants in two pockets. Just screw to the wall and plant. They cost £9.95.

Angus Cunningham of Scotscape, says: "They are perfect for the basement flat which looks out at an expanse of wall. But they do take some maintaining and are probably best suited to the keen gardener. But they do provide a real wow factor."

Scotscape will install a living wall from around £500 per square metre and visit twice a year for maintenance.

DON'T FORGET THE FURNITURE

There's no point planting all that food and flowers if there's nowhere to sit and admire your handiwork. The latest idea is the outdoor sitting room.

We've all heard about bringing the outdoors in with big glass doors but this is about reversing that look and taking the sitting room into the garden. At a trade show in Germany last September, the jury loved Modena by Garden Impressions and Cloud by Gloster – a waterproof sofa and table set. Ikea has adopted this idea with its solar-powered outdoor table and pendant lamps for around £25. Or visit keslighting.co.uk for a selection of outdoor lamps from the Eglo Cuba range, for around £40.

vegetables now make up 70 per cent of sales, compared with 40 per cent five years ago. But if, like many people, the wait for an allotment in your area is around 20 years, it's time to look to your own garden for inspiration.

You can grow plenty of things on a balcony or window box if you plan it carefully. Use the method below and adapt it to the space you have.

SQUARE FOOT GARDENING

The idea came from the US about 20 years ago and has been hugely successful. There's even room for flowers. Basically you divide your area into square feet with a different crop in each part. Make sure they are all close together and as soon as one is finished, plant a new one. For more information, visit gardenorganic.org.uk.

PREPARING YOUR PATCH

It doesn't matter if it's a full-size allotment or a pocket handkerchief of land, nothing will grow if you don't prepare it properly and that means weeding. "Bindweed will keep coming back so if you are taking the organic route then you will just need to keep digging it out," warns Bowden. "If you are using weedkiller, then make sure it's systematic – meaning it will go through the roots." Raised beds are a good idea. You can buy a kit to build them and can put in a semi-permanent membrane and some pebbles to stop the weeds coming through the bottom.

WHAT TO GROW

Among the easiest vegetables to grow – you can sow them outside in mid-March – are broad beans, peas, radishes, rocket, dill, chervil, lettuce, spinach and chard. Try Chard Bright Lights which have yellow, orange, purple or white stems and will brighten up the garden as well as the plate.

Avoid feast or famine situations by

"Don't be in a hurry – oak leaves can take a year to rot, so it's a slow process. If you really can't wait, you can buy a compost accelerator to speed it up."

Once you have done that, she advises a trip to your local farm. "The garden borders will appreciate a mulch of well-rotted farmyard manure. Spread a layer on the surface of the soil about 7-10cm deep around all the plants. The worms will take it into the earth and it will improve the soil structure."

A WORD ABOUT COMPOST

The stuff that you put in your flower pots and window baskets will be very expensive for a large area, says Bowden. You need soil conditioner and some more manure. Blended stable manure and composted bark is perfect but do not buy multi-purpose compost as it's so expensive. Look out for bagged topsoil which is much cheaper and see it has ten per cent manure.

GROW YOUR OWN

Hard economic times and rising food prices have made many turn to the veg patch to save money. Sales of seeds are increasing and the industry is now worth £60m annually. Suttons say