

WARM IDEAS FOR COOL MONTHS by Edythe Falconer

There's a fierce wind blowing, snow is piling up, temperature is dropping. On the stove there's a hot soup brewing, in the hand is a hot toddy, in the head are dreams of summers past and summers to come. However, there's still some Christmas shopping to do – an amaryllis for Aunt Beth, a Norfolk Island Pine for Uncle Will, and a poinsettia for your child's long suffering piano teacher. Oh, yes – and the family Christmas tree. It's too late to consider purchasing a potted outdoor tree for spring transplanting unless you have a hole ready for it when holidays are over. They won't survive a lengthy stay inside. On the other hand, to show off a different kind of Christmas tree, you could purchase another Norfolk Island Pine, which is an indoor evergreen, and an excellent choice for small spaces.

Fast forward to January. If you now have a "used" cut tree, try propping it outside in a pail of ice, decorated with tasty tidbits for jays, cardinals and chickadees. January thaws provide an excellent opportunity to tour your winter garden and reawaken the wonderful ideas you had while gardening the previous summer. There's time to appreciate the magnificent trunk and branch structure of deciduous trees and their lovely patterned bark. An additional shrub or small tree would add to the effect. Your red-stemmed dogwood was rather sad looking toward the end of summer. Now its stems stand out dramatically against the snow, and beside the rocks you added last year. How can you achieve even more dramatic contrast? Ornamental grasses come to mind. The echinacea you didn't cut back last fall wear pert little caps of snow. Maybe less cutting back would leave even more saucy winter forms to clothe themselves in winter's snowy down.

In the mean time there's another kind of reality. The snow on top of the hedge looks heavy, to the point of causing damage. It's time to take a broom and remove it. If your hedge is close to the street and vulnerable to salt damage it isn't too late to erect a protective barrier between it and the street. If you use plastic don't let it touch the hedge. A hedge needs to breathe. You'll also want to check for rodent damage at the base of trees and shrubs. Pull snow away from trunks and destroy anything that looks like a nest. If you do find damage you will probably put tree guards on your shopping list for next fall. You can prevent further damage now by putting sections of screen or small mesh chicken wire around the base of each trunk. While you're looking for tree guard material you may come across other jobs-in-waiting. Although you cleaned tools in October, you may not have oiled them and you may not have reorganized them as planned. You can also assess your seeding arrangements. It's not too soon to decide what you're going to use and where to put the whole lot. If you are recycling containers, some may need a good cleaning. If you ran out of seed starter mix last year you'll need to shop for some now. Nothing is more annoying than discovering in mid-March, when you are primed and ready to go, that you still don't have everything that you need. On those other kinds of days, the fierce ones, there are plenty of interesting indoor projects to engage your attention – along with soups and toddies. Suppose you decorated with brilliantly red poinsettias during the holidays. They're getting straggly and you are thinking of tossing them. They can have a second chance as outdoor plants on your patio next summer. To do this, keep their soil barely moist and put them in a cool place. When summer temperatures get above 15C harden them off gradually, start giving them more water, and boost them with a spring tonic of 10-10-10 fertilizer. Although you won't see red again unless you subject them to a precise regime of light and dark in the fall, they will still provide interesting accents for your deck or patio.

Early January is a good time to search out garden courses, workshops and lectures. Our local community college has many such offerings, and garden clubs and horticultural societies also provide informative speakers at their various meetings. Check frequently for gardening announcements in local newspapers.

Indoor time can be usefully and enjoyably spent browsing through catalogues, magazines and gardening books. Jot down favourite ideas that have become "root bound" in your head – ponds, shade gardens, a moon garden, tall grasses, an arbor, a rock garden – and then prioritize them. Start working through references and list by category the plants you would like to have in each setting. Do "ballpark" costing. With every dream there are reality factors to be considered - including time.

In January and February time seems limitless. Come spring it melts away like snow. As you progress through your January brainstorm, get another toddy - or some tea - and match ideas to both time and money. No second mortgages for you. No regrets because you didn't get a project completed.

Finally take more walks through your winter wonderland, feed the birds, make angels in the snow, breathe in fresh air and count your blessings. Spring is just around the corner. A minor detour of three months is not a problem!