

We Love January

for frosted tips, berries and bark

It is tricky to find a reason to love January. We are all feeling a bit sluggish after the jollities of Christmas and, to be honest, our gardens are not exactly stuffed to the gunwales with excitement and fizzy whizzings. Instead of splashy colour, this month we must look out for the small things. Let us wrap up warm, clasp each other's gloved hands and venture out into the cold garden to see what treasures we can find there. The deal is that if you get out and garden in January, then you are entitled to extra biscuits when you come back indoors.

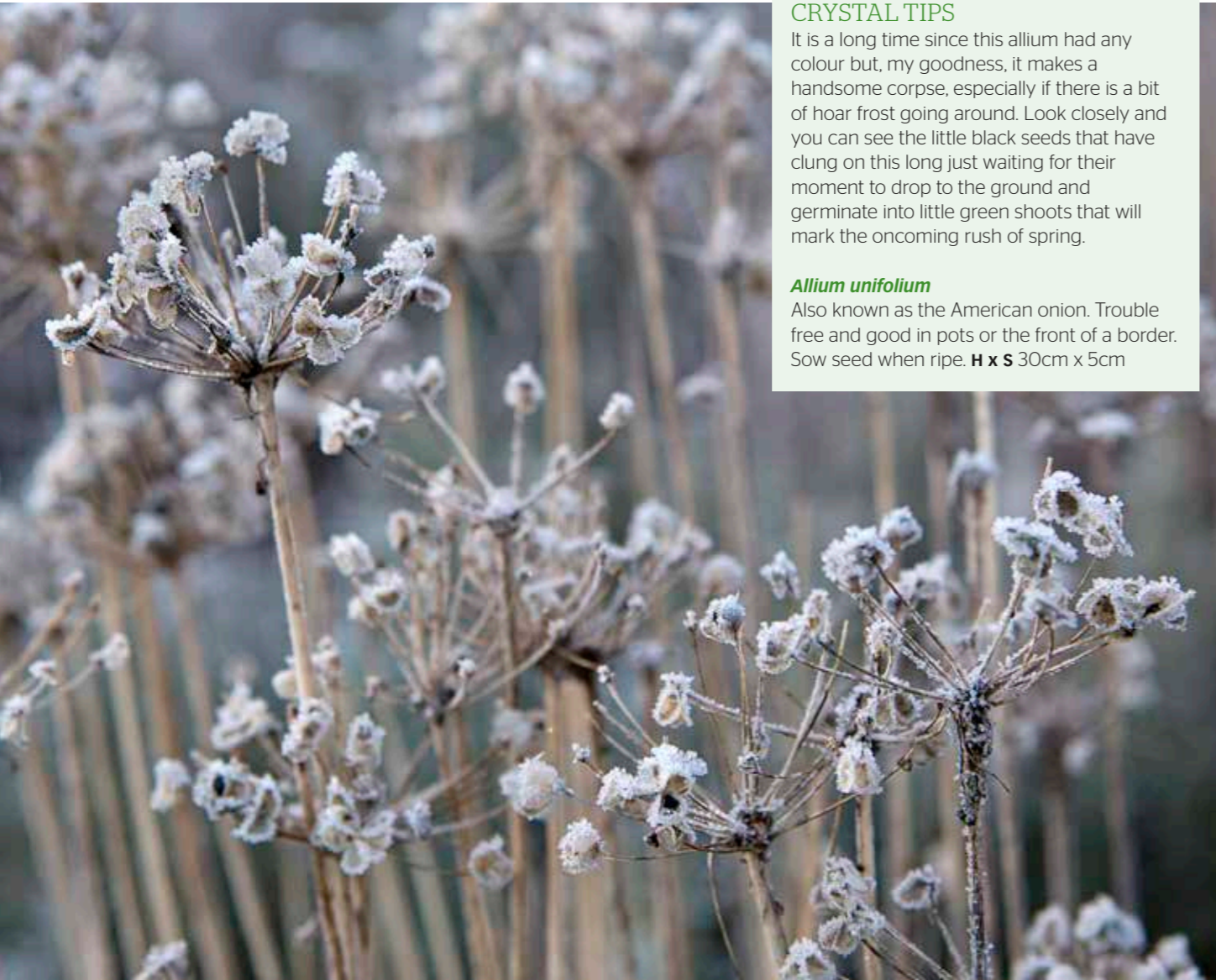
Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

STAR OF THE MONTH
Inula magnifica 'Sonnenstrahl'

Sonnenstrahl means 'sunbeam' in German. It may be that when looking out of the window on a January day on the hunt for sunbeams, you are disappointed as everything is unremittingly grey. All I can say is that you must sit tight and before you know it there will be sunbeams dancing on every surface, the light will come flooding back, the days of sniffles and extra jumpers will be far behind us, and this plant will be covered in the cheeriest yellow flowers you could ever imagine. In the meantime, it makes, I am sure you will agree, a very handsome seedhead.

Happy in a bit of shade with good soil. Sow seed in a cold frame and divide in either spring or autumn.

Height x Spread 2m x 75cm



CRYSTAL TIPS
 It is a long time since this allium had any colour but, my goodness, it makes a handsome corpse, especially if there is a bit of hoar frost going around. Look closely and you can see the little black seeds that have clung on this long just waiting for their moment to drop to the ground and germinate into little green shoots that will mark the oncoming rush of spring.

Allium unifolium
 Also known as the American onion. Trouble free and good in pots or the front of a border. Sow seed when ripe. **H x S** 30cm x 5cm



SPRING HERALD
 Now we are in business. Look at that – the first flower to show its head above the parapet and the bringer of joy to the dark months. Still a little shy, with its eyes always looking coyly to the ground, but such a magnificent plant, especially with the dark leaves as contrast.

Galanthus elwesii
 Everybody loves a snowdrop. Best planted 'in the green', which means it's dug up and divided just after flowering. Buy from reputable suppliers only. **H x S** 20cm x 5cm

Ophiopogon planiscapus 'Nigrescens'
 A black evergreen, good for edging paths or for containers. Divide in spring when its new growth has begun. **H x S** 20cm x 30cm

WINTER CRACKER

People get very agitated by ivy. It is true that it sticks itself firmly to walls and also true that it can sometimes interfere with tree growth but, in the right place, it is a crackerjack of a plant. The perfect green wall: always shiny, good insulation, an excellent late source of nectar for bees and ideal winter quarters for all sorts of wildlife. The berries are good too – like earrings made from peppercorns.

Hedera hibernica

A big old evergreen climber that will cover anything, be it in sun or shade. Good for camouflaging an eyesore or as groundcover in troublesome places. **H x S** 12m x 8m



BARK UP THE RIGHT TREE

The bark of this pretty cherry is about the best you will find - the white blossom is attractive without being spectacular, but the bark has the deep nutty gloss of a newly hatched conker or the burnished toecaps of your grandfather's best brogues. If you are particularly keen, then much family fun can be had polishing the bark: a bit of vigorous buffing livens up the circulation on a cold day.

Prunus serrula

Best planted in a spot with full sunshine. Tricky to propagate (needs grafting), although softwood cuttings can work. **H x S** 10m x 10m



SWEET SENSATION

Winter scent is much more precious than summer scent, as it seems to travel further in the cold air. This is one of the best, so just close your eyes and inhale - it's like drinking in the sweet breath of Aphrodite or stroking the paws of a particularly cute puppy. Make sure that you always plant them close to paths or doorways, as something so precious should never be wasted.

Sarcococca confusa

A good background evergreen in summer. The flowers may be very small but they sure pack a punch. Take semi-ripe cuttings in late summer. **H x S** 2m x 1m