

This is the beginning. We wake up (some of us possibly feeling a little delicate after the excitement of New Year's Eve) to a new morning and a brand-new year. It sparkles with opportunity and promise: What will we grow? Will it be an early spring? Will the summer be blessed with sunshine? Will there be long, languorous lunches on our lush lawns? Right now, these things all seem a long way away but, gardeners are full of optimism and hope - enjoy the little gems that the last of winter brings and be confident that we are on the way up.

Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

We Love January

For sparkling winter gems

STAR OF THE MONTH

Miscanthus sinensis 'Graziella'

Occasionally I come across people who announce that they don't like grasses. I get a little intolerant as it is a bit like saying that they don't like drums. For much of the year ornamental grasses provide a good solid percussion track to all the music of summer. They are reliable and unflashy - until now, when they suddenly reveal themselves as sleeping prima donnas. While the rest of the garden is slumped in winter, these have suddenly caught the spotlight and launched into a prolonged and invigorating solo. How can anybody dislike such gems?

Early flowering variety that, as you can see, looks fab in frost. Cut to the ground in late winter. Good for dried flower arrangements.
Height x Spread 1.8m x 90cm

PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

WINTER SCENTSACTION

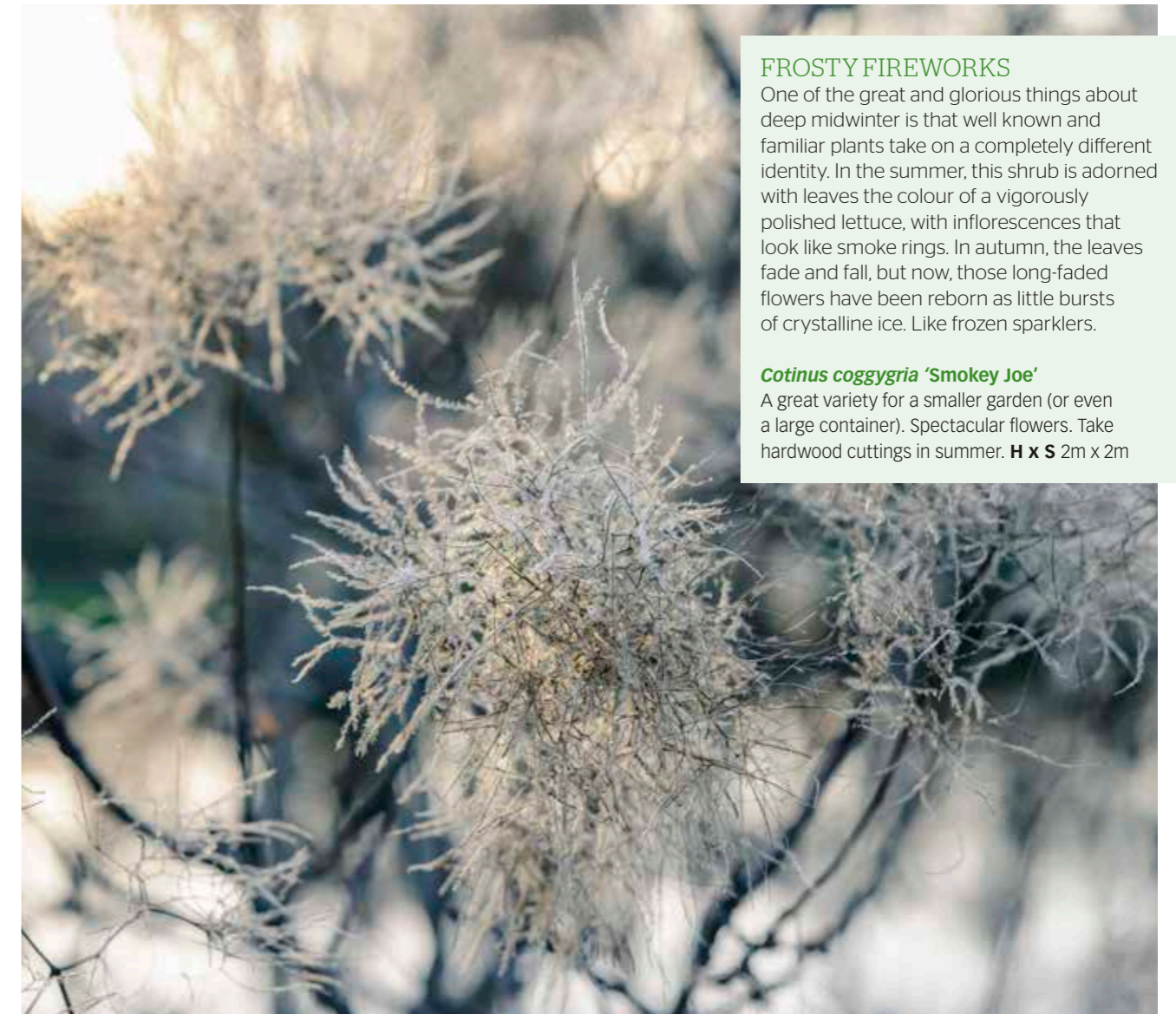
Those of you of a certain age may remember an ice cream called a Lord Toffingham. It was a confection of toffee and banana (although I doubt if any fruit was involved). It was also the same colour as this meeting between the gloriously scented flowers of *Hamamelis* and the bark of *Acer griseum*.

Acer griseum

Paperbark maple. Slow-growing tree good for smaller gardens. Limit pruning to the three Ds – dead, damaged, diseased. **H x S** 10m x 6m

Hamamelis mollis 'Wisley Supreme'

Plant close to a path or doorway as the scent at this time of year is unmissable. Best in acid or neutral soil. Tricky to propagate except by grafting. **H x S** 3m x 3m



FROSTY FIREWORKS

One of the great and glorious things about deep midwinter is that well known and familiar plants take on a completely different identity. In the summer, this shrub is adorned with leaves the colour of a vigorously polished lettuce, with inflorescences that look like smoke rings. In autumn, the leaves fade and fall, but now, those long-faded flowers have been reborn as little bursts of crystalline ice. Like frozen sparklers.

Cotinus coggygria 'Smokey Joe'

A great variety for a smaller garden (or even a large container). Spectacular flowers. Take hardwood cuttings in summer. **H x S** 2m x 2m

PHOTOS: JASON INGRAM. WITH THANKS TO ASHWOOD NURSERIES, KINGSWINFORD

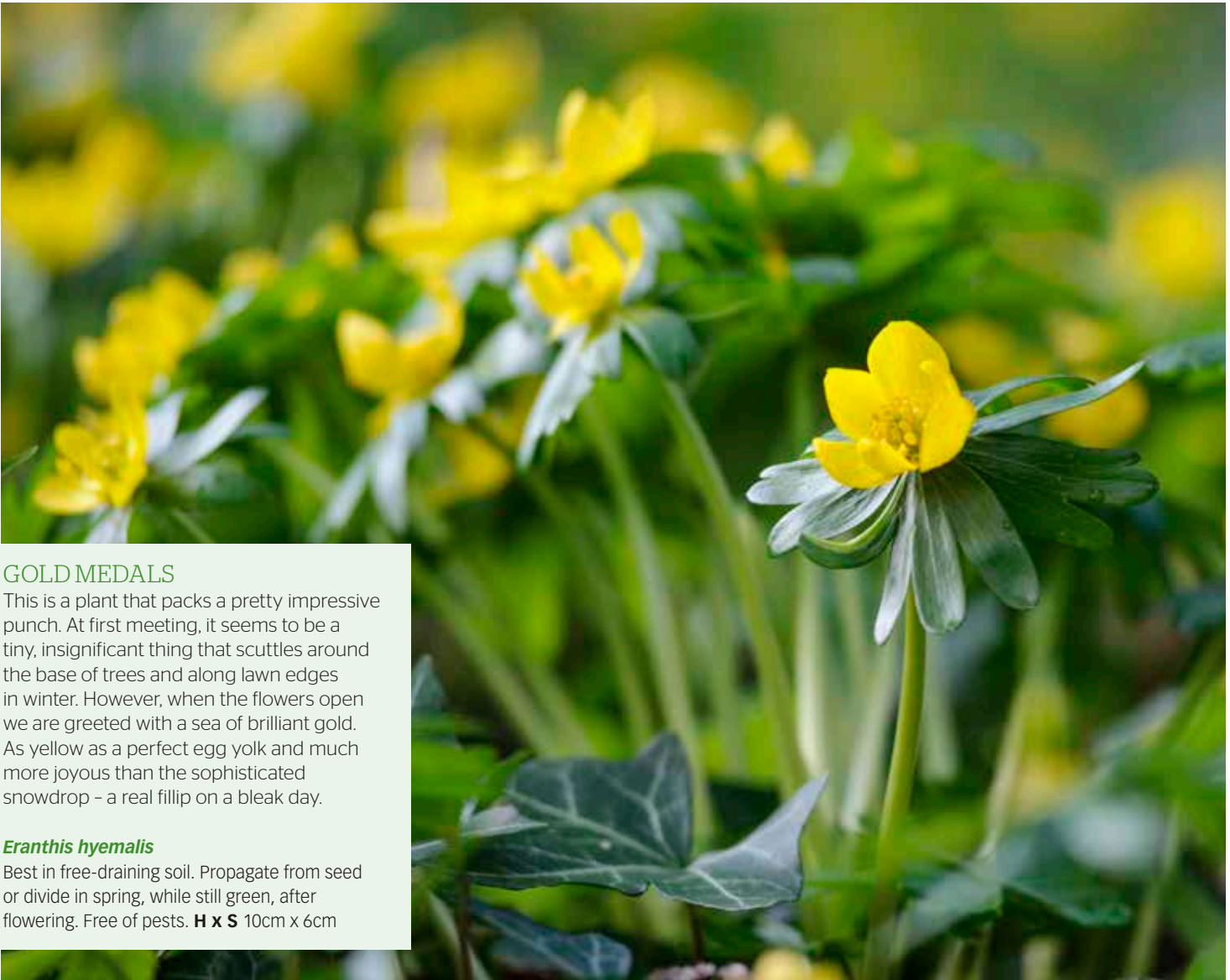


TEASE ME, PLEASE ME

In my last garden, we had a wilder bit that we called the meadow. The grass was allowed to grow longer and we encouraged as many of the more easily established wildflowers to come and live with us. There was cow parsley in May, cranesbill in June and teasles for as long as possible. They are remarkably resilient and hang on for ages, giving pleasure to us and food for finches.

Dipsacus fullonum

Biennial, so flowers in year two, then sets seed and dies. Tiny blue flowers in summer. Good for goldfinches. **H x S** 1.5m x 50cm



GOLD MEDALS

This is a plant that packs a pretty impressive punch. At first meeting, it seems to be a tiny, insignificant thing that scuttles around the base of trees and along lawn edges in winter. However, when the flowers open we are greeted with a sea of brilliant gold. As yellow as a perfect egg yolk and much more joyous than the sophisticated snowdrop – a real fillip on a bleak day.

Eranthis hyemalis

Best in free-draining soil. Propagate from seed or divide in spring, while still green, after flowering. Free of pests. **H x S** 10cm x 6cm



NOBLE OF SPIRIT

Many of the plants this month are having a second burst of life. This is no exception. A few months ago, this hydrangea was boasting lush leafery and flowers as plump as Christmas turkeys. Time has taken its toll and the colour has been drawn out of the blooms. But there is still a spark of spirit in there and, even now, the flowers can still hold themselves with nobility.

Hydrangea paniculata

Flowers dry well. Deadhead in early spring to encourage more flower heads for next winter. Take cuttings in summer. **H x S** 3.5m x 2.5m

ROLL OUT THE GREEN.

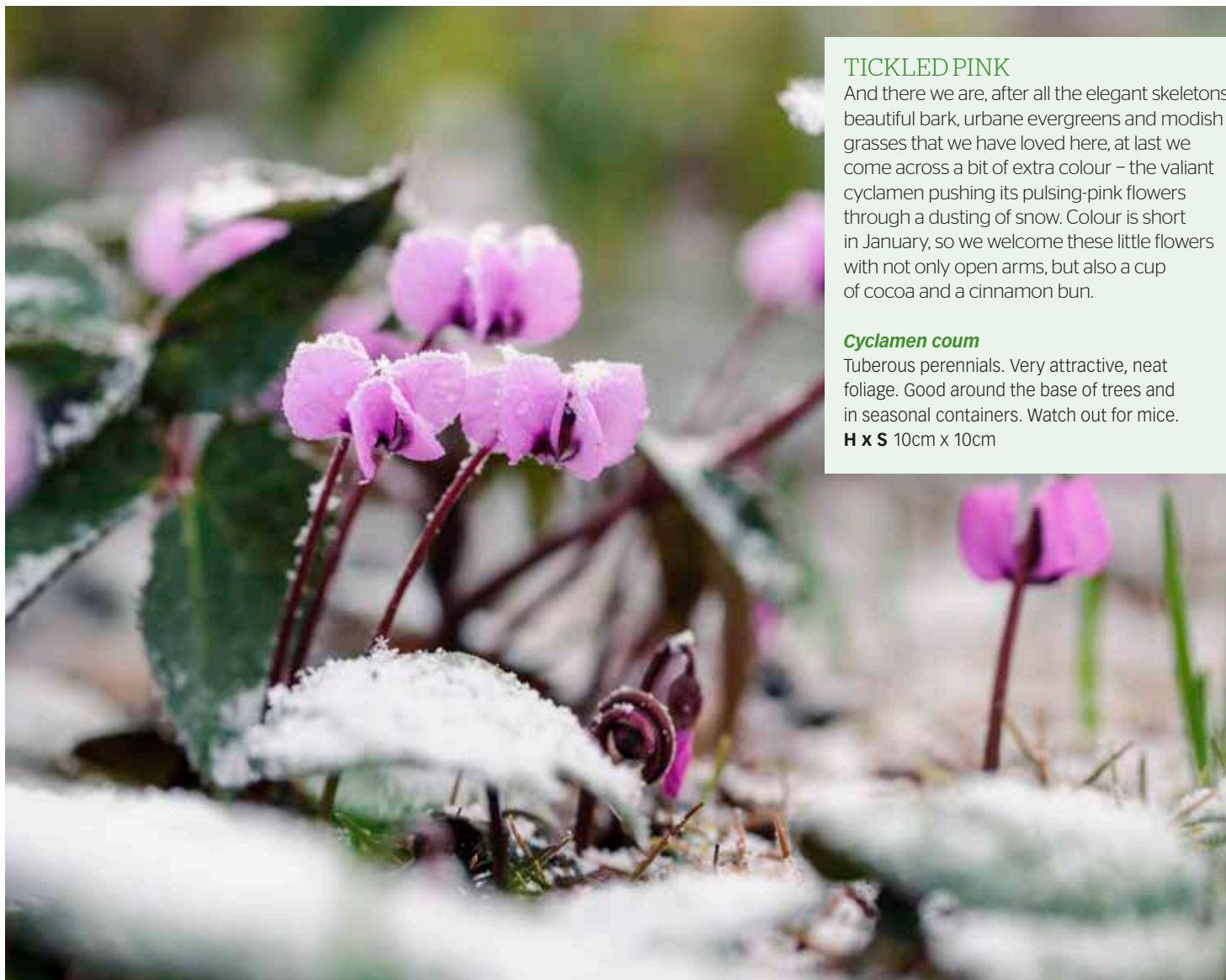
No matter the season, these two will always be there - a bulwark of well-grounded greenery, while all around them flowers fade and die. They are, like all best friends, there to watch your back and give you solid evergreen support when you most need a bit of a boost.

Pinus mugo 'Winter Gold'

Dwarf pine, useful alternative to topiary in borders. No pruning required. Grows in any soil as long as it has full sunshine. **H x S** 1.5m x 2m

Chamaecyparis lawsoniana 'Columnaris Glauca'

One of the best upright blue conifers. Makes a good screen or specimen tree in a medium-sized garden. **H x S** 7m x 1.5m



TICKLED PINK

And there we are, after all the elegant skeletons, beautiful bark, urbane evergreens and modish grasses that we have loved here, at last we come across a bit of extra colour - the valiant cyclamen pushing its pulsing-pink flowers through a dusting of snow. Colour is short in January, so we welcome these little flowers with not only open arms, but also a cup of cocoa and a cinnamon bun.

Cyclamen coum

Tuberous perennials. Very attractive, neat foliage. Good around the base of trees and in seasonal containers. Watch out for mice. **H x S** 10cm x 10cm