



We Love December
for its vibrant winter colour

You will have noticed, I'm sure, that it is December. You have, perhaps, got your tree decorations down from whatever corner of the attic you threw them, your pudding is maturing nicely, a sparkly jumper has been bought ready for the office party and you have found you are humming *Mistletoe and Wine* to yourself at inconvenient moments. I'm afraid that the majority of this month will be dominated by such things - you can't stop it, so it is best to throw yourself wholeheartedly into the maelstrom and remember that the garden is always there for when you need a bit of peace.

Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

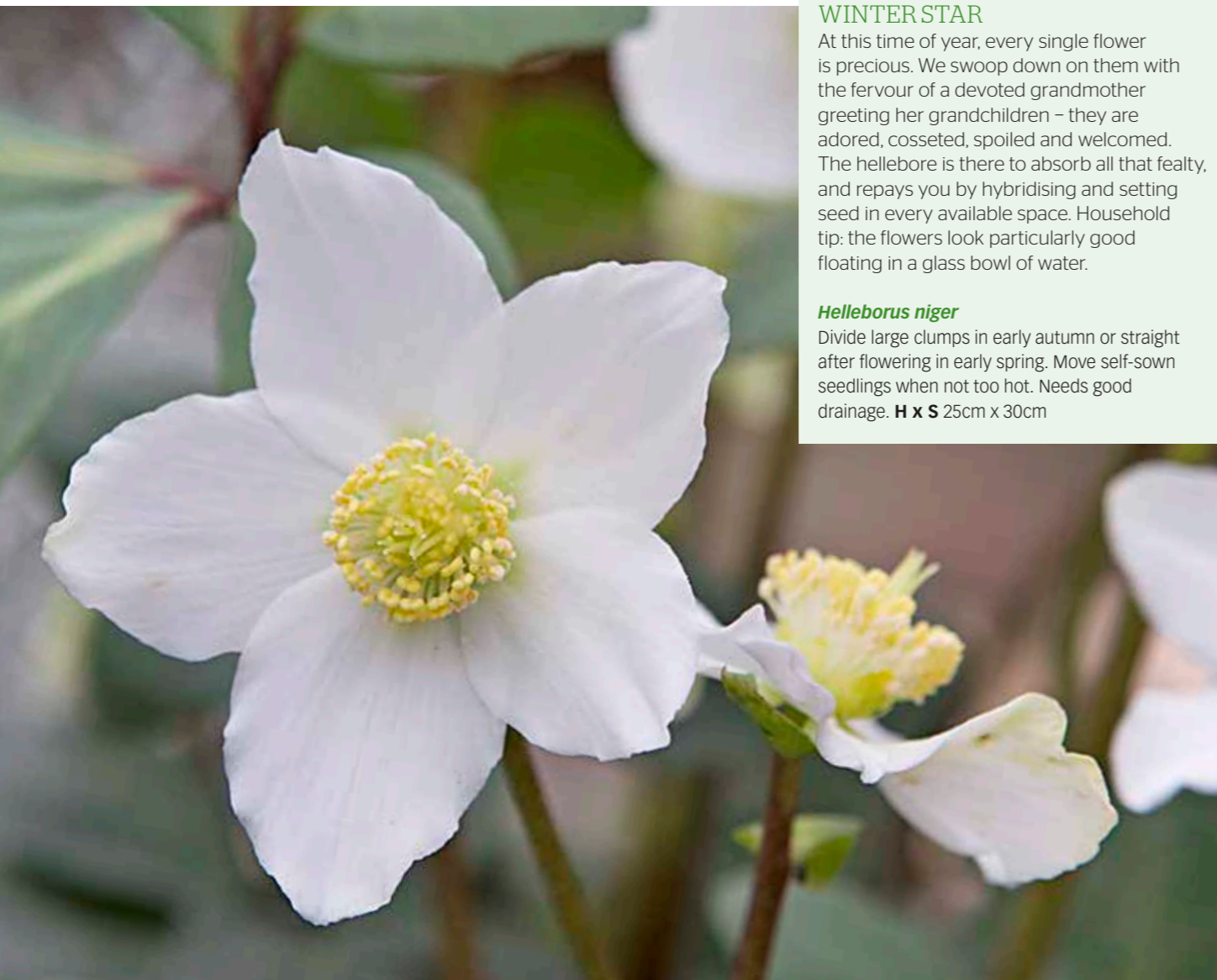
STAR OF THE MONTH

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium* 'Argentea Marginata')

Nothing in the garden says Christmas like a big holly laden with bright berries. Through the dreariness of winter they sparkle like disco balls in a dingy nightclub. This one is even better than usual as it has that subtle variegation to make our wreaths a bit special. If we go by the old carol - and on this occasion, with such a fabulous specimen, I really think we should - then, "of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown". The runner-up, on that occasion, was the ivy, if you recall.

Quite slow to establish. Best in a bit of sun. Excellent for wildlife as it provides cover and food. **Height x Spread** 12m x 6m

PHOTO: JASON INGRAM



WINTER STAR

At this time of year, every single flower is precious. We swoop down on them with the fervour of a devoted grandmother greeting her grandchildren – they are adored, cosseted, spoiled and welcomed. The hellebore is there to absorb all that fealty, and repays you by hybridising and setting seed in every available space. Household tip: the flowers look particularly good floating in a glass bowl of water.

Helleborus niger

Divide large clumps in early autumn or straight after flowering in early spring. Move self-sown seedlings when not too hot. Needs good drainage. **H x S** 25cm x 30cm



HANGER-ON

Mistletoe is, as I am sure you know, a parasite that anchors itself into crevices and crooks in other trees. It has long been considered a bit of a magic plant – as proved by the great Getafix in the adventures of Asterix and Obelix. Also, in Norse mythology, Baldr, the brother of Thor, was killed by a spear made from mistletoe. Nowadays, thank goodness, it is more about kissing than killing.

Viscum album (mistletoe)

Not always easy to establish. Squish a berry into a sheltered joint and hope for the best. Too much mistletoe can adversely affect the host tree.

H x S 1m x 1m

BERRY GOOD

This is a much undervalued plant, often thought of as only useful as a big prickly thing in the corner that is mostly there to discourage burglars. It does this job admirably but it can also be pruned into an espalier or cordon to transform a wall. White flowers, evergreen leaves and vivid orange berries as gleaming as a marchioness's earrings – that is a pretty impressive line-up in anybody's book.

Pyracantha 'Saphyr Orange'

Propagate from semi-ripe cuttings in summer. Good for roadsides and polluted sites.

H x S 2m x 2m



POTS OF PURPLE

Phwoarr (as they used to say in the tabloids), what a stunner! I think that it is unlikely they were talking about plants, but let us extend the repertoire. This display is a nice combination of stunning callicarpa berries, a strong grass and a little pop of dark purple heuchera.

Callicarpa bodinieri 'Profusion'

Best to have more than one plant to ensure good pollination and fruiting. Easier to propagate from cuttings rather than seed. **H x S** 3m x 2.5m

Heuchera 'Licorice'

There are many, many heucheras to choose from in every shade, but this is one of the darkest – a great contrast with white flowers in summer. **H x S** 25cm x 40cm

Pennisetum setaceum 'Sky Rocket'

A reliable, late-flowering grass. Its flowers look great in autumn sunshine and the evergreen leaves are good in pots. **H x S** 90cm x 45cm



SEASONAL SPECKLES

If you thought that all the best clematis were around in the summer, then you are missing a bit of a trick. There are a few hardy, less flashy souls that do not come into their own until the darker days of December. This is one: speckled as a fresh egg and really welcome at this time of year, it is perfect for a trellis, an obelisk or even an arch.

Clematis cirrhosa 'Calycina'

Evergreen and scented flowers. Adaptable, so good in borders or containers. Prune lightly if necessary after flowering. **H x S** 3m x 3.5m



PHOTOS: SARAH CUTTLE. LOCATION: ROSE MCMONGALL, DIPLEY MILL