

We love December...

for warm glints and frosty delights

December is a month of contrasts. Some people dread the whole 'joy to all' vibe while others throw themselves into the vortex of tinsel, community singing and indulgence. Outside, the contrasts continue: we want Christmas to be cold and snowy but without the inconvenience of burst pipes or blocked roads. Take comfort from the simple things, like harvesting your own parsnips. Whichever camp you fall into, I hope the month brings you everything you wish for.

Words by **James Alexander-Sinclair**

STAR OF THE MONTH *Cotoneaster lacteus*

This is a formidable plant: robust, beefy and spectacular. If you have place for a large glossy evergreen that drips with berries as bright as rubies and as plentiful as plankton, then this is the one for you. It's an adaptable plant; I've seen it growing as a shrub, a tree and a hedge. The flowers are small but we can easily forgive such minor flaws when the rest of the plant is so wonderful.

● **Care** Happy in sunshine or partial shade. Plant in free-draining soil. Very little pruning is needed, just remove dead, diseased and damaged shoots after flowering. ● **Height x Spread** 4m x 4m



1 *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Aphrodite' and *Carex flagellifera*



2 *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' and *Skimmia japonica reevesiana*

Plant partners

Enchanted aspects

Festive pairings that add a touch of drama to winter borders

1 *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Aphrodite' and *Carex flagellifera*

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself in the garden: the air is cold on your cheeks and there is a delicious scent, sweet yet spicy, soft yet brittle. Chances are you're standing close to a hamamelis, you lucky gardener.

Hamamelis x intermedia 'Aphrodite'

- **Care** Best on slightly acidic soil. Great autumn colour. Propagate from seed or winter grafting.
- **Height x Spread** 3m x 3m

Carex flagellifera

- **Care** Evergreen tussocky sedge. Excellent as a foil. Good in sun or partial shade. Divide in early summer.
- **Height x Spread** 60cm x 75cm

2 *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' and *Skimmia japonica reevesiana*

The combination of black and red is always striking, and here we have the perfect match of dramatic berries as scarlet as Snow White's lips against the dark, sultry leaves of the ophiopogon.

Ophiopogon planiscapus 'Nigrescens'

- **Care** Looks like a grass but it's a perennial closely related to the lily. Full sun or a bit of shade. Divide in spring as soon as you see new growth.
- **H x S** 25cm x 30cm

Skimmia japonica reevesiana

- **Care** Acid soil if possible, but also a stalwart of the winter container. Hermaphrodite so berries reliably. Take semi-hardwood cuttings in the late summer.
- **H x S** 75cm x 100cm

3 *Stipa tenuissima* and *Phlomis russeliana*

Phlomis is a useful plant – evergreen with great seedheads, thrives in free-draining soil and has beautifully textured, slightly hairy leaves. Works well with most grasses at this time of year to make a combination that, although monochrome, is very stylish. Drop a handful of crocus in the mix and you have something even better.

Stipa tenuissima

- **Care** Gorgeous, fluffy-headed grass. Best in full sun where it should happily self seed. Short-lived. Grow in moderately fertile, free-draining soil.
- **H x S** 50cm x 60cm

Phlomis russeliana

- **Care** Good flowers mid summer. Best in full sun and excellent on dry banks. Spreads easily. Divide in spring.
- **H x S** 90cm x 60cm

3 *Stipa tenuissima*, *Monardella major* and *Phlomis russeliana*