

The days are lengthening, there are snowdrops and catkins and possibly an early crocus or daffodil. Don't be fooled, it's still winter. Do not sow anything yet! Gardening books are often written for southern areas of the UK and we have to make Cumbrian adjustments. February can be the coldest of months, everywhere is still wet, light levels are low and seedlings will get leggy rather than thrive. Old gardeners used to tell you if you could sit comfortably on the soil with a bare ass then spring had come and it was all right to sow outside. Personally, I'd give this advice a wide berth...

It's also too soon to cut back the old dead growth you may have left in for overwintering wildlife. By now it will look untidy and soggy but resist the itch to cut it back. It's still sheltering wildlife. Leave it until new green shoots begin to appear and only then cut it back with regard to the prevailing temperature. Autumn fruiting raspberries should be cut back now to allow the new growth room to spring up, but I have my doubts about this. Is it still home to critters?

If it's still winter, it's still the dormant season. The dormant season (approximately December to March) is the time when plants are not actively growing and is the optimum time for planting and transplanting woody shrubs and trees. When the soil warms up again they will romp away having had a while to settle in along with the soil around their roots. This means it's still fine to sow trees, shrubs, bare root canes and fruit bushes.

It's also a good time to prune blackcurrants and gooseberries. This should not be a daunting prospect. Use sharp secateurs and a pruning saw for branches thicker than a pencil. Here are some pointers

- Cut out dead, diseased, crossing and crowded stems
- In a young bush this may be all you need to do. The older the bush the more stems you will need to take out. In an established bush cut out, right to the base, approximately a quarter to a third of the oldest branches. It's usually pretty obvious which ones need to go. The bark is thick, they have far fewer shoots and buds. These make excellent pea sticks in the coming season.
- Look at the new shoots in the centre of the bush which grew last summer. Cut out the weak, thin and spindly ones. Leave in the ones which will replace the branches you have removed, hopefully these will be the strongest and biggest. Only leave in the very strongest.
- The finished, pruned bush should resemble a hollow cup. Cut out any growth, usually last year's, which is growing from the inside of the stems/branches into the middle of the bush. This feels difficult and excessive but lets in light and air, allows pollinating insects access to the flowers and promotes ripening of all that lovely fruit you should be looking forward to.

Gooseberries only

- These tend to grow outwards while currants grow upwards. Check that none of the lower branches have rooted into the soil. This is not a disaster, you will have a new bush. Just cut the branch off at the base in the centre of the bush, dig up the rooted bit of the branch and replant it in a new place, or give it away. It will fruit in two or three years time.
- Cut back by a half last year's new growth at the end of the branches. It's quite clear which is newer and which is older growth as they are a different colour.