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Opening Extract from...

Fragrant Plants

Written by Lucy Summers

Published by Headline

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1

Lucy Summers would be happy to hear from readers with their comments on the book at the following e-mail address: lucy@greenfingersguides.co.uk

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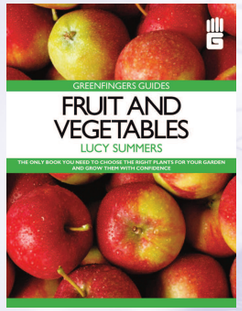
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To Elle – the loveliest flower in my garden

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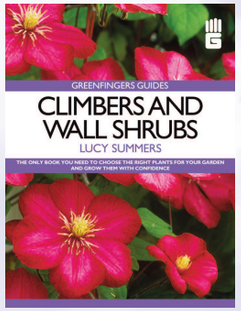
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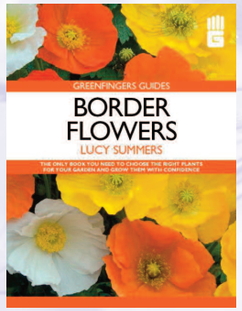
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Border Flowers
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Contents

Introduction 6

Choosing fragrant plants 8
- Using this book 9

Spring 10
- Fragrant roses 34

Summer 38

Autumn 73

Winter 79

Aromatic plants 87
Planting with fragrant plants 92
- The shopping list 92
- Planning a scented garden 94

Aspect 96
- Sun and shade 96
- Shelter 96

Soil 97
- Types of soil 97
- Improving the soil 97

Growing 100
- Buying 100
- Planting 102
- Supporting plants 103
- Mulching 105
- Watering 105
- Weeding 106
- Cutting back 106
- Pruning 107

Hardiness 108
Problems 110
- Leaf and stem pests 111
- Plant diseases 114

Propagation 117
- Growing plants from seed 117
- Growing plants from cuttings 119
- Layering 121
- Dividing perennials 121

The gardening year 123

Fragrant plants for specific purposes 124
Plant index 127

Planting with fragrant plants

Why are some plants scented and others not? Their means of pollination has much to do with it. Plants that are wind pollinated, such as ornamental grasses, don't need a scent to attract insect or animal pollinators: their pollen is carried on the breeze. Wind-pollinated plants are dowdy compared to the outrageously flirtatious flowering plants that rely on birds or insects for reproductive success.

Plants with boldly coloured flowers in bright reds and pinks can easily attract insects' attentions with their gaudy apparel. But pastel or white plants, which aren't giving off the 'sure thing' signals of the brightly coloured harlots, often have a secret weapon in their amorous armoury: sweet perfume. Many of the plants I've written about here have white or pale coloured flowers which often look fairly insignificant – but they do smell wonderful.

There are plenty of unscented plants that offer extravagant blooms in bright colours, leaving the more modest fragrant plants to add their own special sensory dimension. Scented plants are as much about pleasurable memories and associations as they are about flowers or shapes. Bruised aromatic leaves or the whiff of pungent herbs tell us we've arrived in the kitchen garden; the waft of sweet peas heralds the arrival of summer and the heavenly perfumed roses summon romantic moments or pleasurable reminiscences of childhood. Flowers may be the glory of the garden but perfume remains their poetry.

An ideal plant will provide great foliage and attractive flowers as well as pleasant fragrance, but it is totally acceptable to choose a scented plant just because it has a lovely smell, even if its other features are a little dull. This is particularly true in winter, which offers a secret cache of scented shrubs. These may not be flamboyant in flower, but their perfume packs a punch on a cold winter's day, unchallenged by the myriad perfumes that dizzily intoxicate in the summer months. And sometimes an evocative smell is an unintended surprise from a plant that is serving another function altogether, such as making an evergreen hedge or screen.

Plants that have sweet, spicy or exotic fragrance are doing their best to attract bees, butterflies, beetles or night-flying moths – and their attractiveness to these insects is yet one more reason for choosing to grow fragrant plants. Some plants have fouler scents; these are relying on low-life lotharios such as flies and bluebottles for their breeding success. They have not been included in this book, as the smell of rotting carrion (which is common among such plants) is not bewitching to the twitching nostril.

The shopping list

Using scented plants in the garden needs careful thought. A few fragrant plants can go a long way, but they will be taking their place in the garden among a host of glorious plants with strong visual appeal.

First, consider the atmosphere you are trying to create. You may love the rough and tumble cottage-garden style with billowing roses and honeysuckle. Or perhaps you have a very austere modern garden with clean, crisp lines but want to introduce fragrance in keeping with a contemporary style of planting. Keep this vision in mind while making more detailed plans.

Next, assess the garden space and planting areas. Look at the aspect (see page 96) and the soil (see page 97) and then spend a few evenings leafing through gardening books and magazines, making a list of the plants (scented and unscented) that catch your eye. Note how big each plant will grow and whether you have the right soil and location for it: if not, be ruthless and cross it off the list.

Now consider the colour choices, imagining which ones are going to complement the flowers in your garden. Whites, blues, pale yellows and pinks all work well together. Or maybe the bold oranges of hemerocallis or the deep purple and vibrant reds of rhododendrons have more appeal for you.

Pay close attention to the flowering periods. If you choose three scented plants that flower at the same time and plant them close together, the olfactory experience will be overwhelming. By choosing plants that flower in succession, you are more likely to end up with a steady release of fragrance – as one scent fades, another takes over. And spacing scented plants a reasonable distance apart (at least 2m/6ft) will allow the nose some respite.

Think also of plant shapes and leaf colour. Ensure you have spreading, mound-forming plants as well as vertical ones to create interest in the border. Choose a few plants that are architectural or structural in appearance, to create focal points in the border. It is a real bonus to find a fragrant plant that has great foliage. Try to mix large-leaved plants with others that have smaller foliage. And how about those that offer interesting flower shapes, and seed heads or berries after flower? A plant that offers fragrance, foliage and seed heads, such as some of the few fragrant clematis, is going to provide a long season of interest.

If you are just beginning to plant a new garden, pop down to the local nursery or garden centre and pick out all the plants on your list (assuming there are not too many). Arrange them on one of the pathways and stand back. How do they look together? Are the heights, shapes, leaves and colours complementary? This is incredibly useful in helping you visualise the likely end result once everything is planted. And if the plants are in flower, it is also a good opportunity to



A blue haze of scented lavender in summer: fragrant plants encourage beneficial insects into your garden



The scent of jasmine intensifies in the cool of evening

check that you like their smell. Visiting the many private houses that open their gardens is another good way of gathering ideas for new planting schemes and seeing desirable plants in situ.

Now, exercising a fair amount of restraint (which is always hard, but necessary), edit the list again. Pare down your choices so that you end up with a smaller number of plants that flower in succession. Look at the list again. Presumably there are fewer colour and scent clashes. Go with those.

How many plants do you need? It rather depends on whether you are adding scent to an existing scheme, or starting from scratch. A couple of plants will be enough to fill any gaps but if the space is woefully bereft of planting you will need many more. Single plants of many different varieties are not very effective: planting a group of at least three of each perennial will have more impact. Plant in groups of odd numbers for an informal effect, and in even numbers for a more formal appearance.

Planning a scented garden

How do you decide where to put your scented plants? Position them for your own private pleasure, in places where you can best appreciate their fragrance. Plant a scented shrub or climber under a window so you can enjoy a draught of its sweet perfume as you go about the day's chores. A floral scent on a grey winter's day will lift your mood: one (or more) of the many scented viburnums by the front path will provide that seasonal boost.

Some shrubs, such as honeysuckles and jasmines, become more fragrant in the evening, as the light fades and the temperature cools. Sheltered areas that are seldom stirred by a breath of air will contain a powerful scent very effectively, so a courtyard or seating space where you like to unwind on a balmy evening is the perfect spot to plant one or more of the night-scented plants. This is when the pale colours of the many desirable evening wafters come into their own, taking on a shining luminosity in the twilight.

Common sense suggests that herbs grown in pots are best sited somewhere near the kitchen door, and you may also have the space to grow herbs in their own raised beds or in a herb garden or parterre, creating an aromatic haven. Be warned that some herbs, such as mints, comfrey and lemon balm, just don't know their place and can become very invasive. These are best grown in pots unless you can give them a space to themselves.

A hot sunny border is an excellent place to grow the lovely aromatic shrubs, such as cistus, rosemary and lavender. Some scented shrubs will really benefit from being planted in shady beds, and they can be underplanted with scented flowering bulbs such as snowdrops, daffodils, hyacinths and iris for a fragrant spring.

Vertical spaces such as house walls and outbuildings provide the ideal habitat for many a scented climber and are space-saving in smaller gardens. Unsightly fencing is perfect for a sprawling honeysuckle – and why not throw in a scented rose for good measure? A late spring-flowering honeysuckle and a summer-flowering fragrant rose will combine beautifully, providing a continuous stream of scent for two months or more. An arch, pergola or trellis cries out for a fragrant partner. These are perfect spots for a fragrant clematis, smaller climbing roses, honeysuckle, jasmine or wisteria.

Don't overlook the obvious natural supports in your garden. There may be a tree that looks dull once its main flowering period is over. If it could take the weight of one of the more vigorous climbers such as a rambling rose or wisteria, this would lengthen its season of interest. Avoid putting a timorous grower against a rampant tree or shrub (or vice versa) as one will undoubtedly outgrow or swamp the other. Pair moderate growers with other scented climbing plants of the same growth rate.

Check that the climber won't outgrow the space you have to offer it. So, if you are looking for a climbing rose to grow in a container in a small town garden, don't pick a rambler: it may be small when you buy it, but could easily end up topping 6m/20ft. On the other hand, climbers or shrubs that are a bit sensitive will never attain their expected height if they are planted in an exposed spot, so find them somewhere sheltered from cold winds.

Trees and shrubs need to be sited with care from the outset. They will become permanent features in the garden and, unlike perennials, they cannot be easily moved. Don't be afraid to ask a nursery for advice about rates of growth and expected heights and spreads. A tree, shrub or hedge does not stop growing once it has reached the height you want: it will keep growing at the same rate unless you put in the effort to keep it at a manageable height. Think twice, plant once.

It would be folly to pick a tree or large shrub for its scented properties alone, so think about other features, such as shape: mounding, rounded, conical, spreading, ground hugging or weeping. Shrubs can be used creatively as hedging or for purely ornamental purposes, planted in a boundary, border or shrubbery. A slow-growing shrub may be just right for making a division in a garden – if it's fragrant, too, why waste a heaven-sent opportunity to provide both amenity and pleasure? An evergreen hedge can be used to create privacy or hide an unsightly landmark – and if you choose osmanthus or one of the evergreen viburnums you have fragrance and practicality in complete harmony.

Clematis [roses] grown up walls can bring wafts of perfume through open doors and windows



Growing

There are a wide range of plants in this book, from herbaceous perennials and bulbs to shrubs and small trees. They have different growing needs, but almost all are easy-going plants that need little maintenance. However, without exception, they need light, water and certain minimum temperatures to thrive happily.

Herbaceous perennials are soft-stemmed plants with ornamental flowers that live for more than a year, producing new growth and flowers each successive year. Perennials grown in this country are usually hardy or half hardy and most are easy to care for. They need little maintenance other than cutting back to ground level in autumn or early spring.

Bulbous plants (bulbs, corms and rhizomes) are perennials that have developed their own storage chambers containing all the nutrients each potential plant needs to complete its life cycle. They are usually bought and planted when dormant, and they disappear underground once they have flowered.

Trees and shrubs are a more permanent part of the garden than perennials. In the wild, mature shrubs and trees are able to cope without help, and the same applies in the garden if they are well cared for when young. Shrubs may need some pruning, to keep them flowering at their best and to prevent them growing too large, but otherwise they can look after themselves.

Climbers are simply plants that climb, and include perennials and wall shrubs. Most of them need some form of support to help them climb, and some also need annual pruning.

Buying

Try to avoid the temptation to buy on impulse. If you plan ahead and make a list, you are more likely to buy a plant that earns its keep and suits your soil or garden aspect.

Container-grown plants Many plants (particularly herbaceous perennials and climbers, but also shrubs and trees) are sold in pots. They can be kept in their pots for as long as necessary (which could be a year or more). Just keep them well watered.

Pots vary in size. Larger plants have more immediate impact but smaller plants are much cheaper and can also be easier to establish: it is surprising how quickly a plant grows once it is planted in the ground.

caption



GROWING BULBS

Bulbs are rather miraculous. They may look unpromising, but each one is a food and water storage chamber for a dormant plant. Contained in its fleshy root are all the ingredients it needs to transform into a thing of beauty.

Ensure bulbs are plump and firm to the touch and not squashy, dried out or soft with mildew. Many bulbs deteriorate when left out of the ground, so try to plant them soon after buying.

Bulbs need good drainage; they will rot in waterlogged conditions. Plant spring-flowering bulbs in September, summer-flowering bulbs in spring and autumn-flowering bulbs in summer (with the exception of snowdrops, which are usually dug up in early spring as they are beginning to die back and replanted straight away).

If you are planting into a flowerbed, dig in some fertiliser or bonemeal. Make a series of holes, planting bulbs as you go. Obvious as it may seem, plant bulbs the right way up. The pointed tip should face skywards, with the flattened basal plate pushed firmly into the soil.

As a general rule of thumb, plant bulbs to a depth of at least two to three times their size. Some bulbs, such as crinums, are planted with the 'nose' or tip of the bulb breaking the soil: these bulbs flower better when they are baked in summer, rather than kept cool and moist underground.

Once flowering is over, let bulb leaves die back naturally. Never cut them back or tie them in knots: this prevents them building up food stores for the following year. All fully hardy bulbs can be left in the ground, provided the soil is well drained. You may lose a few bulbs each year to squirrels and mice, but most bulbs left underground will survive and gradually increase in number.

Less hardy species (including most summer-flowering bulbs) need to be lifted and stored through the winter. Dig them up once the foliage has yellowed, and discard damaged bulbs. Clean off loose soil, remove decaying foliage and leave them to dry for a week in a shed or airing cupboard, before storing and labelling them in shallow trays or brown paper bags in a cool, dry, frost-free spot. Dusting them lightly with fungicide will help prevent disease. Replant the following year. Alternatively, buy fresh bulbs each year.

Scented bulbs are ideal for 'forcing' (bringing into flower early indoors), giving a delightful reminder of spring while it is still winter outside. Hyacinths and small narcissi are commonly forced for their scent.

In early autumn, place a layer of hyacinth bulbs on potting compost or bulb fibre in pots or containers, ensuring the sides don't touch. Fill the pots with more compost, leaving the tips of the bulbs peeping through, and move to a cool, dark place. Keep the compost just moist and leave for 8–10 weeks, until the shoots begin to emerge, then bring into a warm, light room. Expect flowers about a month later.

Pot up daffodils as for hyacinths, but leave their tips just below the compost surface. They need more light than hyacinths so, when the shoots appear, place them on a warm windowsill until they flower. After flowering they can be replanted outside in a sunny sheltered spot.

It is important to buy disease-free plants. Look for fresh green leaves that aren't blotched or discoloured and make sure stems are undamaged. Check that the roots aren't escaping through the bottom of the pot. If the plant is not too big, up-end it into your hand: the roots should be white and healthy and not wrapping themselves round in circles. Press your thumb into the surface of the compost to see if it is moist and spongy. Weeds in the compost are a sign of neglect, so pass those by.

A small, bushy, balanced plant will grow into a more attractive shape than one that is tall and lopsided. Choose a plant with plenty of flower buds, rather than an appealing mass of open blooms that will soon fade.

Bare-root plants Deciduous trees, shrubs and roses are often bought 'bare root'. Grown in a field and dug up with only a small amount of soil clinging to their roots, they are sold in the dormant season, from autumn to early spring, when they have no

leaves and are not in active growth. They are vulnerable to drying out and need to be replanted promptly. Bare-root plants establish quicker than more mature potted trees and shrubs, and they are very much cheaper than plants grown in containers.

When buying, look for healthy, balanced plants with well-developed roots; if the roots are dry and wizened, choose another one. If you are planning to buy a particular species or cultivar for planting in pairs, or as an avenue or hedge, check that the nursery has enough in stock. The plants need to be more or less identical in height and girth.

Where to buy? Garden centres are the obvious place to find plants locally, but bare-root plants are more widely available from specialist nurseries (look in the for relevant nurseries). Nurserymen and women have a wealth of knowledge that they are happy to share, so don't be shy of asking for guidance. A nursery can often suggest a new cultivar that may out-perform your chosen tree or shrub in terms of bark, colour, habit or flowering.

Most specialist nurseries have mail order or online facilities, but some of my best plants have been bagged at markets and garden open days, with the odd cutting from friends.

Planting

Container-grown plants can be planted at almost any time of year, though autumn to spring is ideal. Avoid planting when the ground is frozen or waterlogged. If you are planting through the summer, keep plants well watered.

Choose a suitable place for your plant, bearing in mind its future size, and check that this has the right aspect and soil. Certain plants dislike cold or drying winds, so provide them with a sheltered spot, but remember that the earth at the bottom of walls is notoriously dry, and may have concrete footings; plant climbers 30–90cm/12–36in away from the wall and angle the plant towards it.

Plants appreciate a good drink before planting. Dunk the plant, pot and all, in a bucket of water for half an hour, so the water really saturates the roots. Dig a hole about the same size as the pot and large enough to accommodate the rootball easily. Break up the soil in the bottom of the planting hole as this helps the roots to establish, and throw a generous handful of compost or other organic matter into the planting hole.

Turn the plant upside down, cupping the foliage with your hand for support, and gently ease the plant from the pot. Pot-grown plants often have roots that are tightly bound and wrapped in circles: gently tease them apart before putting them into the planting hole.

Position the plant so that the compost is level with the surrounding soil (clematis and roses are exceptions to this general rule: see pages 114 and 35). Backfill with soil, firm around the plant and water again. Dress the base of the plant with a thick ring of organic matter about 5cm/2in deep after planting.

Bare-root plants are planted in the dormant season, before they start growing. If it is not convenient to plant them immediately, bury the roots in a temporary trench. Plants will keep for some weeks like this so long as the roots are not allowed to dry out.

Plant individual plants in the same way as plants grown in pots (see above). Dig a hole deep enough to spread the roots out, water the roots well, backfill and stake as necessary (see below). An annual mulch of well-rotted manure, about 5cm/2in thick, at the base of new shrubs and trees will make sure the plants establish well.

Reduce the height of bare-root shrubs by half immediately after planting. This may seem drastic, but I have found that they grow stronger and bushier when they are cut back.

CONTAINER PLANTING

Gardening in containers is ideal if you have very little outdoor space, but pots and containers also have a place in larger gardens, where they can make effective focal points or highlight a particular plant. Almost anything can be grown in a container, as long as it does not grow too large.

Lay crocks (pieces of broken terracotta pot) at the bottom of the container, over the drainage holes, to prevent soil becoming waterlogged. Lifting pots off the ground with pot feet also helps with drainage. Where weight might be an issue, for large pots on balconies and roof terraces, fill a third of the pot with pieces of polystyrene before filling the container with compost.

Fill the pot with compost, leaving a gap of about 2.5cm/1in at the top of the pot to allow space for watering. Most perennials are happy with multi-purpose compost, but avoid using old compost as its nutrients will be exhausted and it may contain weed seed. Mixing water-swelling granules with the compost will reduce the watering regime from every day (without the granules) to once or twice a week. Plant as you would when planting into the ground, ensuring the plant is firmed in well, and keep well watered. The compost should feel damp to the touch.

Plants in containers use all the nutrients in the soil each year, so top up the soil annually with organic matter. Alternatively, thumb in small cones of slow-release fertiliser. A handful of pelleted chicken manure, scattered on the soil surface and watered in, is perfect for keeping potted plants well fed.

Spring bulbs being planted in the autumn



Supporting plants

Many plants need additional support as they grow. Always use soft string, raffia or garden twine when tying young plants to supports, to prevent damage to the plant stem.

Herbaceous perennials Staking stops tall, floppy plants falling sideways and crushing their neighbours. Some plants never reach any great height, or are reasonably self-supporting, so staking isn't necessary, but many herbaceous perennials need support.

All sorts of plant supports are available, from bamboo canes and twiggy pea-sticks to

PLANTING A HEDGE

Trees, conifers or shrubs planted close together in a line form a hedge. They will establish best if planted in autumn or spring when the soil is warm, encouraging healthy root development.

Weed the planting area thoroughly and peg a string along the planting line. Dig a series of holes, about 30–60cm/12–24in apart, or dig a continuous trench for bare-root plants. Line the holes or trench with some well-rotted manure and fork in lightly. Plant as above, keeping the plants straight and upright, and ensuring the bases of the stems are not buried.

After planting, cut back the lead shoots and lateral stems by a third in May to encourage bushy growth. Clip hedges regularly to restrict their size and height. Keep the base of the hedge weed free and water regularly in the first year or two, particularly in dry periods. Mulch with organic matter annually in spring.

SUPPORTS FOR CLIMBERS AND WALL SHRUBS

A few climbers are fully self-supporting but many are not. Climbers can be grown on trellis or wires, attached to walls and fences, or up sturdy free-standing structures such as pillars and pergolas, arbours and archways. Wall shrubs will happily grow upwards with support from trellis or wires, and climbing and rambling roses are often trained along wires, to improve their flowering (see page 36). Tie stems in as they grow, using garden twine, raffia or rose ties.

Install plastic-coated or galvanised wires on a wall or fence before planting, using vine eyes or tension bolts placed no more than 2m/6ft apart, with the first horizontal wire about 45cm/18in above ground level and further wires 30–45cm/12–18in apart. Ensure the wires are tensioned and pulled as tightly as possible.

When fixing trellis, mount it on wooden battens to create a gap between trellis and wall. This will ensure good air circulation and help to reduce diseases.



Ornamental structures add instant vertical interest to borders, providing climbing apparatus for fragrant climbers

decorative wrought-iron or plastic-coated metal obelisks and wigwams. Stake plants when planting: it is easy to forget later, and plants look cramped and choked if they are staked when fully grown. Push canes deep into the ground near the plant or position support structures over the plants so they can grow through them. Most perennials do not need tying in.

Trees and shrubs Most shrubs can support themselves, but wall shrubs need tying in to a framework of trellis or wires (see box). Young trees need staking for the first few years after planting. Staking prevents winds rocking their roots, helping them to establish strongly.

Keep tree stakes as low as possible, and certainly no higher than two-thirds the height of the tree. Drive the stake into the open planting hole at an angle in the direction of the prevailing wind. The stake must be driven in firmly or it will not support the tree, but never hammer it through the rootball, as this will damage the roots. Leave about 2.5cm/1in between the tree trunk and the stake to allow the tree some movement while it establishes. Tie the tree to the stake with a rubber or plastic tree tie, to avoid damaging the bark. Large trees may need more than one stake.

Mulching

Annual mulching with organic matter is probably the single most important task in the garden. It improves the structure of the soil, which in turn improves its drainage, fertility and water retention, allowing plants to grow stronger and healthier and flower more exuberantly. Feed your soil, and you will rarely, if ever, have to feed your plants.

Spread a 5cm/2in layer of organic matter over the whole flowerbed or make a collar of mulch around individual plants, avoiding the stems. Apply in late autumn or early spring (or indeed whenever you remember), ensuring the ground is not bone dry or frozen. This will keep the nutrition levels in the soil high, so that they are available to your plants throughout the year.

Sandy and chalk soils need annual mulching unless you want to grow plants in them that prefer poor soil. Clay soil will also benefit. After four years of annual mulching, my heavy sticky clay became pretty manageable; I then mulched it only every two or three years. Give it a go: it seems like hard work at the time, but it will pay dividends.

Mulching with either organic or inorganic materials has other advantages. Applied to moist soil, a mulch traps moisture at the roots where it can be taken up by the plant more effectively and prevents water evaporating from the soil surface. It also prevents weed emergence, by blocking out light to weed seed waiting to germinate. A dark mulch absorbs the warmth of the sun, which will result in better root establishment. Last but not least, some mulches look good.

MULCHING

include well-rotted farmyard manure, mushroom and garden compost, leafmould and grass clippings (see page 99). Bark chippings can have the counter-effect of robbing nitrogen from the soil while they are rotting down, so they are not useful as a nutritious mulch.

, such as pebbles, shingle, slate, river stones or marble and glass chippings, are long lasting and ornamental, but do not improve the soil structure and have no nutritional value. However, if applied to damp soil, they reduce water evaporation. They also help suppress weed growth.

include natural materials such as straw, leafmould, dry leaves or bracken, as well as horticultural fleece. They are placed in a thick layer over the crown of a plant that is not fully hardy, or tucked around it, as protection from inclement weather in winter.

Watering

Mulching is top of the list for water conservation (see above), but it is also important to preserve water where we can. Place water butts around the garden or near guttering and downpipes from the house or greenhouse to catch rainwater. In addition, water in the early morning or late evening, when there is less risk of wastage from evaporation.

The amount of time you spend watering depends entirely on the size of your garden and what you are growing. Pots and containers dry out quickly and need almost daily watering unless you are using water-swelling granules (which can reduce watering to once or twice weekly).

Flowerbeds that are full of herbaceous perennials may need watering two or three times a week, and more often in dry weather – sometimes every day. However, if you have a good many drought-tolerant plants, you can probably go for two weeks or more before having to worry.

A thorough drenching lasting minutes is preferable to one that lasts only a few seconds. If you aren't sure whether you've watered enough, press your finger into the

soil. If the top of the soil is wet but the underneath is still bone dry, carry on until the water has penetrated the first 15–30cm/6–12in of soil.

Some people like to use sprinklers that are left on for a good half hour, soaking different areas of the garden sequentially. My preference is for a leaking hose, which is threaded over the flowerbeds and seeps water gently at low pressure at soil level: the water gets straight to the plants' roots and is not wasted in evaporation. All the leafy growth hides the pipe so it is not unsightly.

Trees and shrubs need regular watering in their first two or three years. After that they will take care of themselves.

Weeding

Some gardeners like weeding and find it therapeutic while others loathe the task. Like it or not, it simply has to be done. Weeds rob our garden plants of light, water and nutrients and it is best to keep up with them or they can soon take over a perfectly respectable border.

Pull out annual weeds before they have time to flower and set seed. (If you are short of time for a full weeding session, nip off the flower buds to stop them pinging their seed all over the place, triggering a small army of weedlings later on.)

Dig up perennial weeds such as nettles, roots and all; small pieces of root left in the soil will grow into new plants.

Weedkillers may leave residues in the soil and they are difficult to apply precisely. If you feel the need to use a weedkiller, choose a glyphosate-based product, which is applied to plant foliage and is inert once it hits the soil, allowing other plants to grow in the same spot. However, it has no way of discerning between a desirable plant and a weed, so be careful when applying it.

You are better off having regular weeding sessions, as mistakes can prove expensive. If you are not sure what is a weed and what is not, let it grow a bit and you will soon see if it's something undesirable.

Cutting back

During the growing season, trim any plant foliage that starts to look a little ragged, and deadhead any tall perennials that have finished flowering by cutting off the whole stem at the bottom, just above the basal leaves.

Most herbaceous perennials (apart from evergreens) die down naturally after the growing season, with the onset of autumn or winter. The majority can be cut back lightly when they've finished flowering, and plants that have masses of flower, such as lavender and rosemary, grow leggy if you don't trim off all the faded flowers.

Personally, I cut back any straggly-looking perennials in late autumn, to keep the beds looking tidy and prevent the decaying foliage harbouring pests or diseases – but I leave any plants that offer appealing skeletal winter shapes to ghost the flowerbeds as long as possible.

In early spring, cut any remaining plant material back to ground level (i.e. as near to the ground as the foliage allows, which will be a little above soil level). Remove all the brown rotting foliage and whatever stems are left, pulling them away by hand or using secateurs. Some perennials put out new shoots early in spring. Be careful to remove the dead material without injuring the new growth hidden among it: don't cut them back too severely, and leave their crowns above ground level. If the plants have formed a large clump, work your way through it in sections. For a smaller clump, one swift scissoring of the secateurs may be all that's needed.

DEADHEADING

Deadheading is easy and enjoyable. Simply break off any spent flowers by pinching them between your thumb and fingers, or snip them off with a pair of scissors or secateurs.

Removing dead flowers keeps the garden tidy and, more importantly, induces some plants, such as roses, to put out a second flush of flowers later in the same year. It may also extend the flowering season: once they have flowered, most plants start making seed, so cutting off the faded flowers can fool the plant into producing yet more flowers instead.

If a plant is a prolific self-seeder, removing the flowering stems prevents it seeding too freely, but leave the flowers if you want to collect the seed or the seed heads are attractive.

Pruning

Pruning small trees and shrubs is surprisingly easy. A great many of the trees and shrubs in this book need minimal pruning: the most you need do is cut out any weak, spindly, dead or damaged growth and shorten extra long shoots that are growing out of line and spoiling the shape. Some, particularly evergreens, prefer not to be pruned at all. Deciduous shrubs and climbers may need some pruning to help them keep their shape, grow strongly and put out better flower displays. (For guidance on pruning roses, see pages 36–7.)

You will need a clean, sharp pair of secateurs for cutting slender growth on shrubs and trees, and a strong pair of loppers or a pruning saw for cutting through thicker branches. Make angled cuts, about 6mm/¼in above an outward-facing bud, so that the next branch or stem grows away from the centre of the shrub.

Specific instructions are given in the relevant profiles, but as a general rule of thumb, prune deciduous trees when they are dormant, in late autumn or winter, and prune early-flowering shrubs and climbers once flowering is over. (If you can see flower buds, don't cut them off or you'll have no flowers.) Some plants make flowers on this year's growth: trim these back in early spring, before new growth begins.

Always start with the three Ds, cutting out dead, diseased or damaged wood. After removing old stems and branches you will be able to see what needs to be done more clearly. Now remove any spindly stems, congested growth in the centre of the plant or wayward stems growing out of line at the sides and spoiling the shape.

Over time, shrubs may grow leggy, with all the flowers at the top and bare stems at the bottom. Cut back a third of the stems to ground level each year, to encourage new vigorous growth.

Some trees and shrubs grow to such a size and height that pruning becomes impossible. Don't worry; if the plant is thriving but is too big to prune, leave well alone.

PRUNING WISTERIA

Wisterias are pruned twice a year, once in late summer and again in late winter. This ensures they make some flowers, rather than a large amount of leafy growth.

After flowering, in July or August, new shoots will grow at a great rate in all directions. Leave any whippy, long shoots until February pruning. Tie in any strong new stems you want to keep to fill gaps in the framework and cut the rest back to 30cm/12in from the main lateral stem. Fresh growth will appear from these shortened stubs: this is what you are encouraging to flower next year.

In February, cut away any dead, diseased or damaged wood. Then cut back the summer-pruned side shoots to two or three buds from the old, darker coloured woodier growth. In the coming weeks the fat, stubbier buds that produce the flowers will begin to develop (the thinner green buds produce new shoots). Remove all the unwanted whippy shoots, and cut back the stems that have been tied in to fill gaps to five or six buds.