

# February: full of promise

In Tom Stuart-Smith's garden, all that remain are the winter toughs. Soon, they will be gone, too, leaving the plot bare. But all is still to come...

**F**ebruary is as bad as it gets. Excepting snow-drop lovers, who are levitating quietly at the mere thought of *Galanthus nivalis* 'Pusey Green Tip', the discreet charms of which are revealed only to those prepared to lie nose in mulch, most of us are just wishing it would all end or, rather, begin.

My own garden has been going through its usual paring down, from the shabby tangle of autumn to the crisp emptiness of early spring. I don't do much about anything until after Christmas, when in an effort to work off the mince pies I start the cutback. First, all the things that have turned to mush - catmints, sages and cranesbills. Then, in January, I move on to the things that looked good in their day but are now forlorn or plain scrappy, such as autumn-flowering echinaceas, heleniums and monkshoods. There isn't much horticultural logic here, just cutting back things that don't look up to much.

During the cold and dry spell that marked the first half of January, things hung on a bit longer and the contrast between the airy delicacy of grasses and the darker line and

forms of perennial stalks and flower-heads was still worthwhile. This year, I have really noticed the grasses that cling on to a bit of warmer colour. Supreme among these is *Hakonechloa macra*, with its gracefully arching and glossy green leaves that turn to warm amber and stay that way until new foliage emerges in spring. The taller (1m) *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah' migrates from a rich, autumn red to a warm russet, and makes a welcome contrast to the taller, bleached-out miscanthus and calamagrostis. *Molinia* 'Heidebraut' in flower is the same sort of size as the panicum; its old stems were a gleaming gold until the end of the year, but have now fallen apart. Piet Oudolf has it in vast swaths at Trentham, contrasted with a smaller (0.6m), darker-flowered variety called 'Edith Dudsus'. It was the most epic planting I saw last year.

The previous winter, a wet and grey one, wasn't much of an inducement to gardening and I couldn't prise myself off the sofa until the end of January, which was a mistake (as far as the garden was concerned). For it was only then I noticed that great patches of hakonechloas, panicums and molinias - which,

along with other grasses, make up about a quarter of all the plants in my garden - seemed to be tilting at curious angles. Further inspection revealed that the roots had been consumed by mice, leaving just a thin scalp with dead foliage attached. I was impressed by the stealth of this rodent gang, but my enthusiasm was dimmed by the prospect of having to replace about 100 plants, and the thought that an exploding mouse population was going to eat its way through my entire garden, followed by some dreadful, lemming-like extinction event on the lawn. Before I lost too much sleep, a natural retribution came from an unexpected source. As soon as the spring cutback was under way and the grassy toupees removed, the garden became a perfect hunting ground for the pair of barn owls that live in our garage. By the end of February, there was hardly a mouse to be seen.

This year, I have been more on the case and now all is quite bare but for statuesque clumps of grasses, sedums and cardoons (right), the real winter toughs, waiting for the last cull. At this point, more than any other time in the year, these few skeletons are seen in splendid



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isolation. My current favourite is *Inula racemosa*. If Martin Johnson were a flower (a ludicrous notion, I know), this would be the one, not much in terms of subtlety but for rank forcefulness it is astonishing. In flower, a spike of crude, daisy-like things up to 2.7m tops off leaves that are 1.2m long and 30cm across. In deep winter, the whole thing has a desiccated drama. Has your garden got room for it? Probably not if you're going by the book - so chuck away the book. I have about a dozen clumps dotted about. They lend a rude wildness that gets my pulse going.

One can only go on looking at corpses with pleasure for so long, and in a few weeks I'll chop the lot down in honour of the first blooming snowdrop, which always seems a little more reluctant to show its face in my garden than in other places. So by the end of the month the garden will be naked and neat. It feels like going back to school with a brisk haircut, and is the moment that feels like the beginning of the gardening year. Seen from this viewpoint, perhaps February is, in fact, as good as it gets. Everything is promise. The first snowdrop is yet to wilt.