

WINTER.

The David Parr house is closed and without visitors from December to February so this is the time for the volunteer gardener to put the garden to bed for the winter and prepare for the next season.

I began by stripping out the spent annuals, dead plants and weeds; then I cut down and marked with sticks the location of plants that had completely died back. Even after this autumn clearance, the garden was not bare because the cyclamen leaves with their white heart-shaped marbling, the bright ferns, the honeysuckle on the fence, all flourished in green, and the broad mats of fleabane were still starred with daisy-like flowers all along the path.

Three large bags of compost had been provided with instructions to spread it liberally over the garden. Task done, I looked round and felt pleased for the newly planted bulbs tucked up cosily under their warm winter blanket. I also found satisfaction in the quiet and tidy look of the beds.

I returned to the garden a few days later, intending to do no more than stand gazing smugly at the result of all those days of work. As I came through the gate there was a terrific noise of flapping and a great flurry as blackbirds and pigeons flew off in all directions and squirrels scrambled away over the fence. Slowly, I took in the scene. It was as if bags of compost had exploded and their contents left to lie wherever they happened to land, that is all over the path, up the fence and over the lawn.

It reminded me of the aftermath of a teenage party. Clearly, word had gone out on avian media that all the birds of the air should rock up at 186 for a fun time with unlimited quantities of free mulch. And as if the mulch bomb wasn't enough, the thrash had been gate crashed by a gang of squirrels who had vandalised the flower pots and played frizbee with the bulbs. Indeed, a couple of morning-after stragglers were still rooting about in the daffodil planter.

I stamped, clapped and waved my arms. "Oi!" I shouted (and other ladylike expressions) but the hooligans just looked up, flicked their tails and vanished with their loot, leaving me to my little dance of rage.

So the next job, after tidying up, had to be getting some squirrel-repelling nylon mesh to put over the tubs and pots. Soon, I set to work with the roll of mesh, scissors and string.



Unfortunately, I'd chosen a very windy day for the task and the netting refused to co-operate. It was like trying to get a toddler into a snow suit. The stuff kept clinging to me, folding back up, attaching itself to my sleeve, earring, spectacles and tangling itself up in the string. At one point, a carefully cut circle took off in a tantrum and rolled away down the path and up into the apple tree. Well (like I never did with the toddler) I triumphed eventually and, just as the sun was setting, managed to get the last of the pots securely covered. 'Nyah, try getting past *that*, Nutkin,' I said to whoever might be listening.



When it came time to prune the roses, they challenged me to cut them back by simply continuing to flower. I told them it was for their own good. It is just that there is something especially lovely and poignant about those last roses of the season: withdrawn, smaller blooms, a little untidy and rain spotted but, if the winter sun shines, holding a faint trace of summer scent. 'Darcey Bussell' performed one last magnificent arabesque with a single bloom of rich, dark magenta; a gorgeous colour I'm sure David Parr could have matched.

Even after pruning them all I could not resist leaving one twig of 'Vanessa Bell'. In the summer this rose produces robust, creamy flowers with quartered yellow centres and a scent of herb tea. As late as February the bush seemed determined to bloom whatever the weather. Rather like the artist herself. It seemed incongruous to find her in this garden. I couldn't see what an early 20th century rebel against all things Victorian could possibly have in common with David Parr, till I realised they both shared a profound admiration for William Morris and, of course, both David Parr and Vanessa Bell used their homes as a canvas to express their vision of a better world.



I was working in the garden, shortly before the house was due to open again. Digging up a plant to move it to a more convenient spot (a Forget-Me-Not as it happens) I turned up a yellow button. I was immediately taken back to the summer garden of the 1950s. Had the button come from one of the children's frocks as they played on the swing or fed their guinea pigs? Or perhaps it had come off Elsie's cardigan as she picked flowers to put in the front window of the house. Being as she was so thrifty, I imagined her searching for the lost button and wished I could sew time together for a moment and return it to her. I keep it as a reminder that, after all and whatever I do here, this will always be Elsie's garden.

c. Elizabeth McKellar, 41 Sturton Street, Cambridge. 1/3/20