

Down the Garden Path with Ellen

“There are two season diversions that can ease the bite of winter;

One is the January thaw,

The other is the seed catalogues.” Hal Borland

Welcome to another year in the life of a gardener. As the above quote states we have both a January thaw and seed catalogues both coming at once this New Year. Except for a very early snowfall and a bit of a cold spell we have had quite a mild beginning to our winter and not the predicted difficult weather we were told to prepare for here in our valley. Although we are just a few weeks into the season, every day brings us closer to spring so even if the wind blows and the snow flies we can still dream of warmer weather and gardening being just around the corner.

The arrival of seed catalogues is a great sign that activities in the soil are about to start. In the past my mailbox would be jammed with these from mid-December until Groundhog Day. Now most companies offer on line lists of their products and you can access them year round. Some of my favourites are Veseys, Dominion Seeds, Thompson and Morgan, Fraser’s Thimble Farms, The Plant Farm, Phoenix Perennials and, of course, Botanus, which can all be ordered on line. I still prefer to study a catalogue in hand and discuss my choices with a telephone call to the company.

Having the girls from Botanus present their slide show on bulbs this past fall was an opportunity to connect the voices on the phone with faces. We had been sharing gardening experiences for several years as I placed my orders for their select plants and bulb. As usual many of the gifts I gave at Christmas had a gardening theme with several including bulbs that I bought at that meeting. My daughter and granddaughter are busy planting up a layered bulb pot for their front door area. The 21/2 year old is getting introduced to the magic of spring gardens already. Years ago my aunt gave a similar gift to my mother and I to enjoy together. Little pots of snowdrop or crocus bulbs are also neat to tuck into gift

baskets. I usually add cuttings of spring blooming shrubs to the top of presents too. As soon as these are popped into warm water they begin to come out of dormancy. Witch hazel, winter jasmine, pussy willow, winter-flowering box, forsythia, quince, and flowering ornamental fruits all can be forced to bloom indoors in mid winter. These are especially welcomed by friends and relatives in colder climates where winter is harsh and spring arrives late. Or for people who live in apartments where there is little, or no, space to grow these plants.

This is the first year in many where I have not found something under the tree that was not related to gardening. I am not surprised because my jungle is full to overflowing and I have most things I need. There comes a time when even gardeners have to downsize or at least simplify! I guess you could count a new foot bath and massage center and all the goodies needed to pamper my tootsies as a gardening gift. Everyone knows how one's feet get forgotten as we toil in the soil and mow and trim. And I did buy myself a new orchid plant after the holiday decorations came down. It always looks so bleak in the front room in January that I try to add a little color and interest where the lights had shone so brightly just weeks ago.

I have started to use cut orchids in my table center for the season. They are expensive but they last for a month to six weeks and everyone seems impressed with the exotic touch. I seem to have trouble getting orchid plants to rebloom in my house but I've also tried disguising a pic of orchid blooms among the growing orchid leaves. I just replace the water every week and I have an orchid display for a long period of time.

In the sun room I've noticed that my clivia has started to send forth stems of buds. These plants like to be root bound and they seem to have reached the point where they are happy to try to reproduce by floral means. Last year neighbours, who were moving away, gifted me with several indoor plants. One of these was a yellow clivia which had not bloomed yet. I am watching for a bud on that plant too. The large white calla is in bloom now too. This plant came from my sister-in-law's garden in White Rock. There on the cliffs above the beach she grows it outdoors and it puts on a splendid display. Here it rots! I grow it in a pot and bring

it in to bloom in January. Also in bloom now are the Christmas cacti. The bright pink blooms cover the three foot wide plant while the smaller red and pale pink varieties are just finishing their display. Most of the sunroom plants will get a good trimming this month and the cuttings will get popped into bedding soil to provide more plants for the summer garden. Feeding also begins this month as I start to ramp up these plants for the next season. Some seed can be started in January/February of perennials and slow germinating vegetables. I have a neighbor who likes to start tomatoes, cucumbers and other melons, onions etc. inside in February then transplants them into bigger pots to go outside into a heated green house until finally are put in the garden in May. He always has veggies to brag about by June and enjoys lush crops until frost.

Not all of events have been rosy these past two months. The heavy early snow brought down many branches on our New Dawn redwood tree. They are brittle by nature and although it is deciduous needle bearing tree it doesn't shed its leaves until late in the fall. The extra weight of the snow twisted the limbs so they had to be cut. The mess was unsightly to say the least. We had a climber come in and remove 7or8 large branches. It looks a bit bare now but it will sprout new growth from the trunk in the spring and will be back to normal in a few years. We also had trouble with the pump that supplies water to our waterfall and keeps the pond aerated during the winter. I stopped working just as the pond froze over. It seemed O.K. for my fish until we got a down pour of rain. The fish got trapped between the lower level of ice and a thin layer on the surface. The herons and raccoons had a feast and we could not reach them because the ice was too soft. Not only did we lose some treasured pets but also quite an investment in money. I don't know how many survived but I hope enough to restock the pond. Again, like the tree, we will recover the loss and carry on.

A reminder to members that have not paid their fees for 2012, they are due at our next meeting. Also the bus tour to the Seattle Garden Show is filling up quickly. If you haven't already bought in you may have missed your chance to enjoy a great event.

Changes will be made to this letter. I have already deleted the “News” part as it does not seem appropriate now that the website gives the news as it happens. The blog, face book page and forum are all available now so that members have venues to exchange ideas and comments and items for sale without having to add to my missive. Therefore, I will just send along my musing when and if the urge prompts me instead of the first week each month. I hope that others will access the areas that Dave has provided and expand our knowledge of gardening experiences in the Valley from your perspective.