

GARDEN NEWS

THE PITFALLS OF PREDICTION

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My last contribution to *Inner View* forecast a mild winter, boasted of how our delicate plants shrugged off what a London frost threw at them, and preened over the sturdiness of our salvias. Perhaps the typographical error of saliva for salvia in that article should have given me warning that ‘mild’ wasn’t going to prove an accurate adjective.

It snowed, the ground froze, as January at last gave way to February the soil thermometers barely rose above zero and the rain gauges over-flowed every day. According to my experience this was not a typical English winter – an opinion which is sort of reasonable as it turned out to be the hardest one since long before I was born, but no excuse for my cockiness in believing the tenderest of plants could survive in the Garden. With spring arriving so late, it is too early to know what has survived, but I am already able to count some losses including the amazing *Echium fastuosum*, which we had nurtured to the point that it would have flowered this spring.

It isn’t just the cold weather which has given the Garden a beating since the New Year. We have had to clear the beds around Paper Buildings to allow scaffolding to be erected. The display of Tulipa ‘Westpoint’ along the War of the Roses border may prove to look a little moth-eaten from the size 12 scaffolders’ boots tramping over it, but there will be colour and once the work is done we are ready to put in hand a dazzling display for the summer. To add to that upheaval the Garden has also suffered a succession of dumper trucks and diggers as the path and edges along the High Border were renovated. In the midst of all that, while I was railing at the loss of the *Geranium maderense* I had grown from seed, a sympathetic horticultural friend said to me, ‘it’s relatively

normal that this kind of garden turns into a building site during the winter’. He was being kind, I know he was right, but I was not to be comforted, particularly when the brave crocuses were savaged by pigeons.

But that was then, now the sun is out, the constant downpours vanquished, there is new growth pushing through the soil and although we can’t quite believe this long, chill, miserable winter is over our spirits are recovered, lifting our heads in tune with the daffodils. The cats have emerged from the potting shed to sunbathe in the yard, each day we open up the cold frames and see our care of their inhabitants has proved worth while. The new path will soon be framed with new turf against a tapestry of colour. Fuelled by all this unaccustomed Vitamin D, we have created a new bed under the hawthorns along Middle Temple Lane, planting a mixture of shrubs and ground-cover. And today we celebrated the sun’s strength and warmth with our first afternoon tea break of the year by the sundial – one of many to come with my team, all of whom I want to thank for keeping going through the cold rainy months, never complaining when fingers froze or rain penetrated the toughest of waterproofs.

My winter prediction may have been wide of the mark, but summer can’t be as bad as that – can it?

