



Christmas gardening trivia

Mistletoe (*Viscum album*): Comes from a Norse legend. Freyja, a goddess, had arranged for her son to be protected from all earthly dangers. When he was shot with an arrow made from mistletoe, Freyja made mistletoe promise never to harm anyone ever again. So today, mistletoe is a symbol of peace and love. Its winter blossoms bring promise of bounty for the coming spring.

Christmas star: Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is named after Colonel Joel R. Poinsette (1775-1851) a gardener, botanist and diplomat of South Carolina. Pronounced POYNE-sett-ya. 'Pulcherrima' means "most beautiful". Around 10 acres of poinsettias are grown in the UK every year. See 10 Jobs for December (HIGHLY) for cultural details.

Holly: The Druids believed that holly was favoured by the sun because it was always green. Today holly represents the ever-living Christ. The white flowers - purity; the red berries - his blood; the leaves - his crown of thorns, and the bitter bark - his sorrow.

Caring for your Christmas Tree

You will need to treat your Christmas tree in a sensible way to maintain its freshness until 'Twelfth Night', the traditional end of Christmas.

When buying a cut Christmas tree, try to ensure that it is a reasonably fresh tree. It should look healthy with dark green foliage or silvery blue foliage depending on variety, and no great amount of yellowing needles. When you bring the tree back to your home place the stem in a bucket of water in a garage or somewhere cool until you are ready to deal with it. Before bringing the tree into your house, tap the base of the tree on to the floor so that any loose needles drop to the ground, then saw off the last couple of inches from the bottom of the stem.

A Christmas tree will need a container in which to stand indoors. We sell a range of stands which will both give support to the tree and hold water. The water will be transpired by the tree and help keep it as fresh as possible under the circumstances. Buy a container which will hold at least a couple of pints of water. Place the tree indoors in as cool a place as possible. Try to avoid placing the tree close to a radiator. Every day or so top up the water level in the container as you will be surprised how much water can be used by the tree.

After Christmas many local authorities (including Milton Keynes and Buckingham) establish points to which you can take your Christmas tree to be chipped up and used as garden mulch.

The Italian Job... In Search of the Spaghetti Tree

I'd never visited Italy until late October this year, writes Plant Manager Chris Day, but when you get the opportunity to visit a new country, a new nursery supplier, it's a must! The island of Sicily nestles just below the 'big toe' of mainland Italy. It takes less than three hours to fly from Stanstead airport and after a leisurely four hour drive across the island you finally arrive in the Sicilian heartland of horticulture, Catania.

Piante Faro is the name of the company we deal with and they serve over 30 countries with their unique range of true Mediterranean plants. Whilst we are all familiar with the large, instant 'Ground force' type specimen plants, Piante Faro is unique in the range it offers the UK garden centre market. So much in fact, when you look at what they grow, they do seem to be second guessing our favourite plants (like Photinia, Laurels and Privet) and achieving much bigger plants in their climate.



Looking like a film set for King Kong or Jurassic Park, these stately palms are transported worldwide, including Old Blighty

So, what can we expect to see was the first question I asked Georgio, Piante Faro's UK representative. "Lots of everything" was his joyous reply! Well, after climbing into a 4x4 the size of a London bus it was time to get motoring around the nursery.



If you think potting your cordyline on the patio takes a while, think how long this field would take!

You only have to look at their growing seasons to realise this is a great place to grow plants on the scale of Pianta Faro. They have the equivalent of two of our growing seasons each year so plant growth accelerates accordingly – this is excellent for evergreen plants. On my visit we had a day's deluge of rain, typical for autumn and the main reason the island is so lush around the coast.

Spending the entire day driving to each of the nursery's various sites (I counted 8), I saw much traditional nursery work going on – hand potting, foliar feeding and top-dressing. I also saw the use of modern machinery and amazing lifting gear which is essential when you have to move 30ft palms and olive trees around the site and onto lorries.

Many 'tropical plants', like cacti and kentia palms are still grown under massive polythene tunnels to protect against wind and keep excessive moisture off them.



Citrus Fruit – coming soon to the Garden Centre, [Order Online](#) now!

The following day we continued the visit by driving north to Sicily's largest growers of citrus and callistemon. This part of the island is more mountainous and is perfect for raising these popular subjects. Walking and talking with the growers you certainly learn much of the detail of commercially producing these plants, treated, dare I say, as we would grow pelargoniums or standard-trained fuchsias. They are grown as a crop and due to the conditions make rapid growth. The biggest task, after potting these plants, is regularly nipping them back to create the shape and bushiness we expect from these beauties. I was impressed by the quality and attention to detail, so hopefully you'll be able to see this stock shortly at the garden centre. The range of citrus will include lemon, calamondino, orange and the much sought after citrus, 'The Hand of Buddha' – all with flower and fruit. The brightly flowered callistemons will be with us late spring line for 2006 – watch this space for details.

But back to the citrus, I don't know if it's the powerful scent, the unforgettable taste or the rich variety which will linger with me for the longest time. Yet in much the way many of us used to 'scrump' apples from gardens (go on, admit it!) when we were young, this happens big time in Scilly's neglected citrus groves around the island. Poorly kept trees are covered in over-zealous bougainvillea, bindweed (the one with the rich blue flowers) and other creepers smoother the once beautiful trees. You know it's a sad memory, but a realisation that agricultural and horticultural practices worldwide are changing, and, as we all know in the UK to our cost, not always for the good.

Before the journey back to Stanstead, I did manage a couple of hours' walk to explore the local villages near to the hotel. Where else could you grow oleanders as street trees and cacti growing so huge close to front windows that you were hard pressed to peer in?! I suspect palms planted too closely to houses could pose a similar problem to the Leylandii issue, but I guess I could somehow tolerate a palm of that stature, could you?

Looking around as we drove, overshadowing everything was Mount Etna. It simply dominates the skyline and on this particular morning a lunar sun eclipse made the light alter and cooled the air, which was rather strange. This nursery sells plants in all sizes from 3½ inch (9cm) pots to 100 year-old olive trees (a snip at just under £5,000 delivered!), and every type of plant you've seen and enjoyed on your summer holidays in Europe and beyond. Cacti the size of footballs, palms towering to three storeys high as well as much loved British favourites like camellia, eucalyptus, hebe and cherry laurels.

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We sell olives year-round at Buckingham, but how about these 100-year old specimens? Not sure if this was a diesel filling station for the vehicles on the nursery, or were they just pumping out pure virgin olive oil!

On the 1st Day of Christmas.... We entered the Christmas Competition!

Just answer these three Christmas-themed questions and win a £20 Buckingham Garden Centre Gift Voucher to spend in 2006! Send us your answers to the following to: December Newsletter Competition, Buckingham Garden Centre, Tingewick Road, Buckingham, MK18 4AE. Alternatively, e-mail your answers to christmas2005@buckingham-nurseries.co.uk, Don't forget to include your full name, address and daytime telephone number with your entry. Closing date is December 31st 2005. Good luck!

Question 1: Pogonophobia is the fear of (a) Snow (b) Eating Poultry (c) Beards?

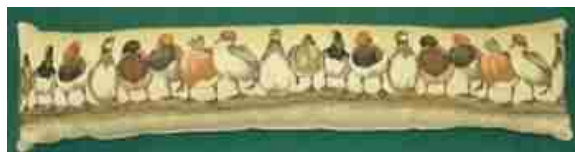
Question 2: The winter berrying 'cherry plant' is correctly known as (a) Capsicum (b) Solanum (c) Chilli pepper?

Question 3: Which one of the following hollies doesn't require a pollinator and produces a crop of berries on its own? (a) Ilex 'J. C. Van Tol' (b) Ilex Ferox Argentea (c) Ilex 'Blue Prince'?

Christmas Gifts

Christmas is getting nearer and nearer and every year there is the challenge of finding the perfect present for all your friends and family. We hope we have filled the gifts area of our shop with a good range of exciting products, so you can do a 'one stop shop' for your presents. To give you an idea of some of the range we have Portmeirion China which would grace any home with either the traditional flower images or two ranges especially for Christmas – Holly and Ivy and the Christmas Story. The latter is new this year and each piece has a line from a poem on it. We also have matching napkin rings with reindeers' names on, and for the children a Father Christmas plate to put a mince pie and carrots on.

Do any of the people you are seeking a present for have a door that does not quite fit and lets the inevitable draught in on these cold windy nights? Well we have a most attractive solution to this problem – a range of draught excluders costing £17.99 each. They are beautifully decorated with pictures of terriers, horses or ducks etc, so you can choose the most appropriate pet to block the draught.



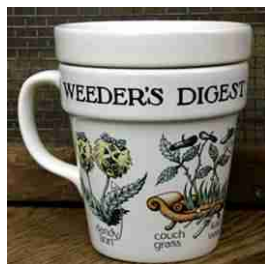
GIFTS FOR HER – to name but a few of the wide choice available – there is the range of toiletries from Woods of Windsor with many different scents from True Rose, White Jasmine and Lily of the Valley.

GIFTS FOR HIM – these include a range of Alan Titchmarsh garden gifts from radios for his potting shed, kneelers and mugs with lids to keep the drink hot for longer – and to stop the bugs getting in!

GIFTS FOR CHILDREN – these include novel Wellington boot money boxes, cushioned lap trays which are ideal for car journeys, a full range of books including classics like Peter Pan and The Wind in the Willows. We also have Beddy Bears, which are teddy bears filled with lavender scents, which when heated in the microwave help to soothe children to sleep and are much safer than hot water bottles.



Apart from these 'gifty gifts' we have an enormous range of houseplants with ones suitable for virtually any position. Do ask for advice when choosing your plants as it would be a great shame to buy a plant which will not be suitable for the room it is destined for. We still have our full range of garden products on sale many of which make an excellent gift for the gardening enthusiast, for instance secateurs and other small tools, gardening gloves, propagators and many, many more.



If, despite our range, you are still not inspired you can always fall back on a gift voucher. Especially for someone you have to post your gift to, these are ideal. You can choose either National Garden Gift Tokens which can be redeemed at many garden centres throughout the country, or Buckingham Garden Centre vouchers which can be redeemed at the Garden Centre or used for our mail order service. We have a special offer on the Buckingham Garden Centre vouchers up to Christmas.

For every £10 in value of vouchers you will receive a £1 coupon which you can redeem in January and February at the Garden Centre – so you will be giving a gift to a friend and treating yourself to a little gift as well!

Catch Chris on BBC Three Counties Radio

We know you listen because you call, visit and chat to Chris at the Garden Centre, but did you know Chris is now the station's twice monthly gardening expert – that's six hours of broadcasting a month!

You can hear Chris on BBC Three Counties Radio (pictured here with presenter Katherine Boyle) on most Saturday mornings between 9-12noon. Tune in on 98, 103.8, 95.5, 104.5 & 94.7FM or on-line at www.bbc.co.uk/threecounties and click on Listen Live.



Ten Jobs for December

IF you potted up some bulbs, such as hyacinths, daffodils or tulips, last September for winter forcing keep an eye on them. Make sure they remain moist, and in the dark until they have established their root systems. It is possible that they have already filled their containers with roots and that the new top growth has begun. If this is so, bring them into the house and set them in a cool room, in indirect light. After a week or so, move them into bright light, and watch them go to town!

HIGHLY colourful poinsettias are often given as gifts at this time of the year. Remember this plant requires good light, a constant temperature of 16C (61F) and moderate watering, but allow the soil to partially dry out in between waterings and avoid any direct heat (radiators, TVs, open fires etc). If dry air is a problem, stand the plant on Hortag (expanded clay aggregate) in a saucer. Keep the pebbles moist.

WINTER rains tend to make you forget about watering your garden. However, plants and shrubs which are growing beneath large evergreens or under the eaves of the house may be bone dry by this time. Lack of water in the cold winter months can be fatal to many of these plants. A quick check will let you know if you need to do a little winter watering.

CONTINUE establishing bare-rooted hedging, top and soft fruits if the weather is mild and the soil is frost free. Now is a good time to establish roses - look out for root-wrapped and bare-rooted roses, as these are often much better value than containerised stock.

STAY off frozen grass!! During mild, dry spells you might get an opportunity to cut the lawn, but make sure the mower is at its highest blade setting before mowing.

TAKE care of our feathered friends. Keep your bird feeder filled, especially when there is snow on the ground, or the soil is frozen solid. Also make sure there is fresh water available for them to drink and bathe in.

USE [horticultural fleece](#) to wrap and insulate against chilly winds through the month, especially important around newly planted stock.

REAL Christmas trees are actually much better for the environment than artificial ones as they are naturally biodegradable and you can recycle them when Christmas is over. Remember real trees are grown in sustainable forests where they pump out oxygen and suck up carbon dioxide, cleaning the atmosphere. Opt for trees with longer needles as these will hold better indoors so good ones to consider are Nordman fir, Lodgepole pine and Fraser fir.

BERRIED plants add welcome colour to the garden scene at this time of the year. Brightly coloured contenders to consider planting in the border, or if space is limited in pots, are Aucuba japonica 'Rozannie', Callicarpa, Cotoneaster, Holly (ilex), Pernettya mucronata and Skimmia reevesiana.

AND FINALLY... Slip small packets of seeds gathered from special plants in the garden into Christmas cards you send to gardening friends and relatives.

BUCKINGHAM NURSERIES AND GARDEN CENTRE

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WINTER OPENING HOURS

Mon-Thurs: 8:30am to 5.30pm, Fri-Sat: 8:30am to 6.00pm

Sunday: 10:30am to 4:30pm (open 10am for viewing)