

It's not just the holly that brightens up winter – berries of all shapes and hues make a lively splash in the garden

NATURE'S BAUBLES

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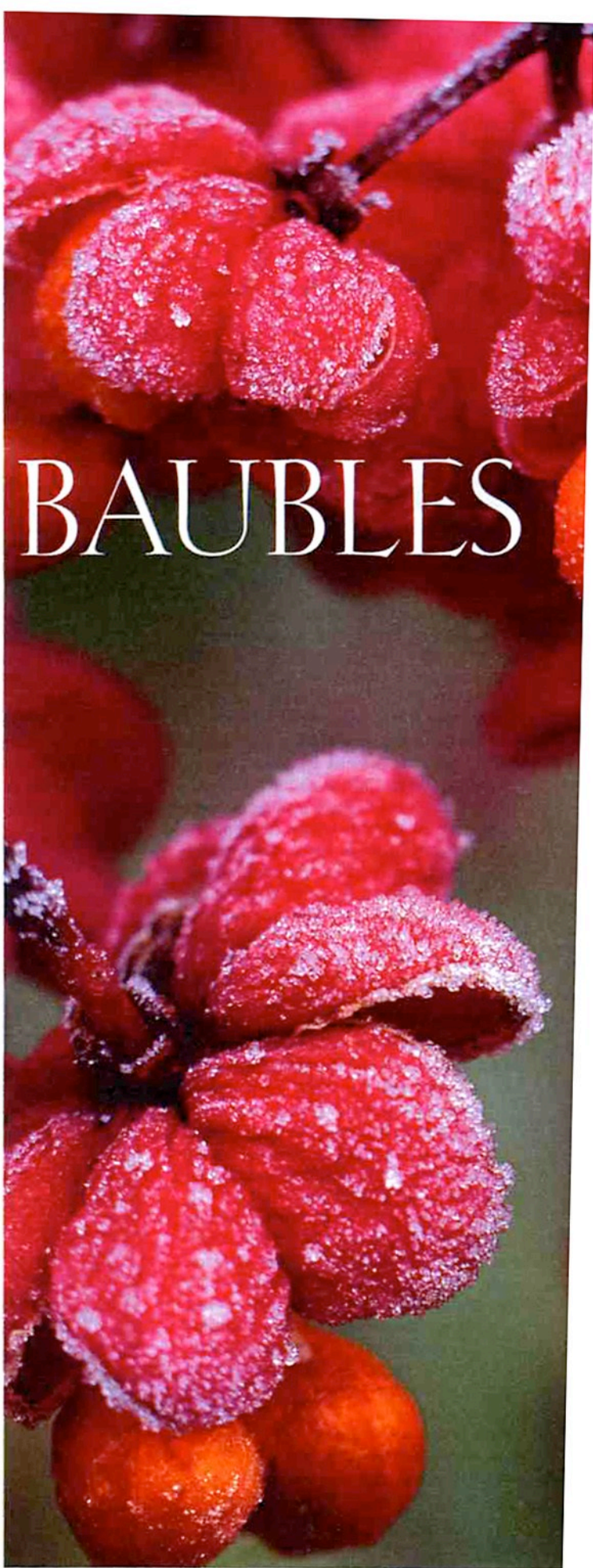
It's winter: the leaves have fallen, the temperatures are far from balmy and the shops are filled with tinselly tat. No longer do our gardens brim with colour. Instead, they have settled back into a torpor of naked branches and valiant greenery. Nothing wrong with that: why should gardens over-exert themselves at this time of year when we spend so much less time outside? However, there are one or two things that the management has provided in order to keep us interested during these dull months, and the most startling of these diversions is berries.

First, a few home truths. The reason that plants flower is not, I am sorry to tell you, for our pleasure and delight, but purely in order to reproduce. They are not interested in filling our vases or enjoying the admiring gasps of visitors. The plants do not give a stuff for seductive photography, eloquent descriptions or the multifarious activities of the Royal Horticultural Society. The only intention of every flower is to produce a seed. All that alluring colour and wafting scent is only there as a siren call to any suitable pollinating insect. To your plants, a loitering bee is far more important than you, in spite of all that work and expense you have put in. They are a bit like cats, really; wholly ungrateful.

Once the pollination bit has been completed, the plant is no longer interested in flowering, hence the dead-heading that fools them into producing more blooms. There are, of course, many varieties that have been tweaked by plant breeders to have this selfish urge removed and will flower for whoever is watching; but, while these eunuchs are cavorting tartily around the place, the other plants are concentrating on producing healthy offspring. Many seeds are tiny, and tumble, unobserved, to the ground; others are a bit more forward and become fruits and berries.

I'm sorry to say that, even at this stage, all is not as it seems. All those vegetables and fruit we grow are not at all interested in helping us make nutritious soups and crumbles, but are just there to make their seeds more attractive. A sweet-tasting fruit is more likely to be eaten by a bird or mammal who, having thoroughly prepared the seed by nursing it in their digestive tract, will then deposit it (along with a helping of organic material) in another part of the county. Nature is cleverer than we will ever know.

So, once we have come to terms with the fact that we are being outsmarted by a bunch of vegetables, we might as well sit back



MARIANNE MAJERUS, GAP PHOTOS, GARDEN COLLECTION



PICK YOUR BERRY

- The viciously spined pyracantha varieties have different-coloured fruit. These are methodically stripped by (mostly) blackbirds, who are very particular: they take the red berries first, followed by the orange and finally yellow.
- Rowan trees (*Sorbus*) are well known for red berries. More unusual are *Sorbus cashmiriana*, a small tree with pure white berries; *S. hupehensis*, whose fruits are pale baby pink; and *S. 'Joseph Rock'*, with its clusters of yellowy orange berries.
- One of the most extreme is the beauty bush (*Callicarpa bodinieri* var. *giraldii*), which can stop you in your tracks. In summer, it's unremarkable, but, come autumn, it has extraordinary clusters of violet fruits, which look like beads.
- Many roses have remarkable hips, in particular the straightforward *Rosa rugosa* and the dog rose (*Rosa canina*), both of which thrive in hedgerows. The very best hips, though, are on *Rosa moyesii* 'Geranium'.
- For something soft and more herbaceous, there is the pheasant berry (*Leycesteria formosa*), which is fast-growing and has deep purply red fruits that dangle like earrings.
- Probably my favourite is *Euonymus europaeus* 'Red Cascade' (a relation of the common spindle tree) whose fruits are an extraordinarily camp combination of orange, pink and red.

and enjoy the experience. The machinations of our gardens may well not be for our benefit, but we can still appreciate their delights. The best-known contributor at this time of year is the holly: everybody can recognise it, and tons of the stuff is distributed around the country every Christmas.

If you are planting holly, always remember two things: first, it grows terribly slowly and, second, not all varieties have berries. To ensure you get berries, you need a male and female plant but, to make matters more complicated, some of the good berrying plants appear to be transvestite. *Ilex x altaclerensis* 'Golden King', for example, is female, and *Ilex aquifolium* 'Silver Queen' is male. See what I mean? Still, the combination of tradition, berries and polished dark green leaves makes it well worth growing, especially as the process can be simplified with self-fertile varieties, such as *Ilex aquifolium* 'J.C. van Tol', which produce perfect berries without the complications.

There are berries in every colour of the rainbow, from the more commonplace reds of guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) and *Cotoneaster*, through to deep blue *Viburnum davidii* and *Clerodendrum trichotomum*. So many shrubs and trees provide more fruits than a costermonger's barrow and are there to keep us company through dark nights and cold mornings. And I haven't even started on pine cones, yet. ■

Main picture: *Euonymus europaeus* 'Red Cascade'.
Above, from left: *Callicarpa bodinieri* var. *giraldii*, *Sorbus cashmiriana*, *Pyracantha*