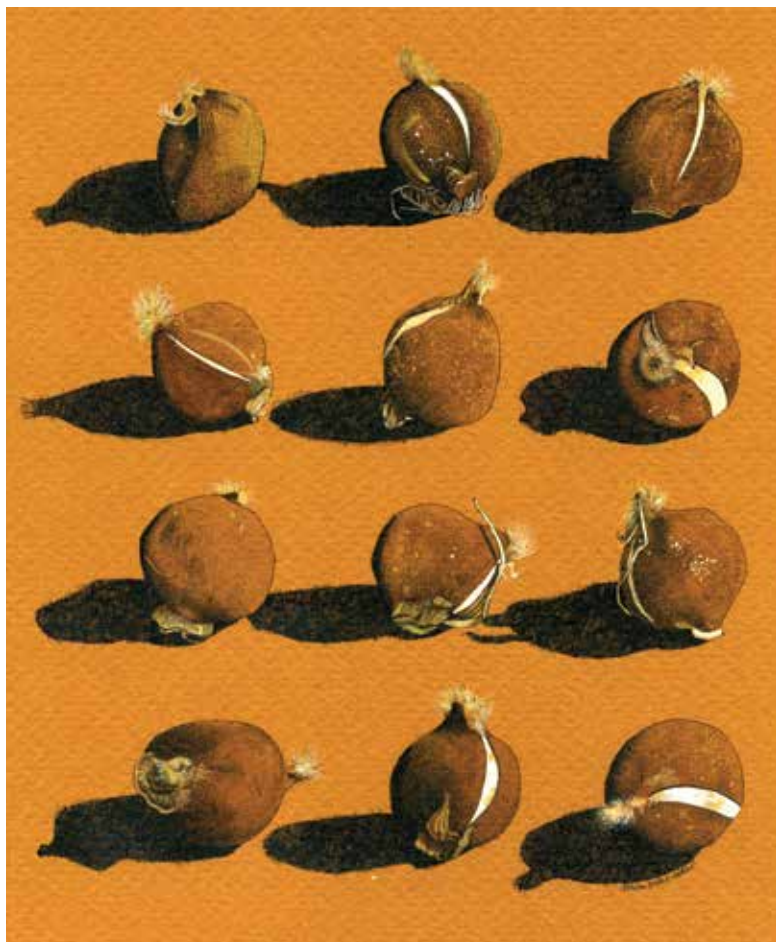


# HORTUS

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# *Stonecrop Gardens, Cold Spring, New York*

## PART FOUR: WINTER

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Like temperate gardens everywhere, Stonecrop turns inward during the winter months, particularly as it is closed to the public from November to March. Aside from dealing with snowstorms and power failures, our chores fall into a steady, satisfying rhythm as we wrap up one year in the garden and prepare for the next. This is also the time when our School of Practical Horticulture takes centre stage. As mentioned in our first HORTUS article last spring, this school is the realisation of a dream shared by Stonecrop's founders, Frank and Anne Cabot, and myself. Now in its twentieth year, we continue to train individuals to know, grow and use plants. We provide workshops for gardeners of all levels throughout the year, as well as a summer internship for a high-school student co-sponsored by our local garden club, but our focus is on one- and two-year internships that are primarily for students pursuing careers in professional horticulture.

Aged eighteen to well beyond, our interns have come to us from across the United States and from as far away as China, with a wide array of backgrounds. All have varying degrees of hands-on horticultural experience, and almost all have university degrees, ranging from horticulture and landscape architecture, to studio art, education, and geology (the latter is now a confirmed Alpinist). After Stonecrop, they have gone on to work at major public and private gardens, farms and nurseries, garden publications and design firms, and to pursue additional professional training and degrees.

The Stonecrop internship runs from late January or early February until the week before Christmas. Occasionally, individuals are invited to stay for an additional year, often with a specialised focus. Although we have living accommodation in our purpose-built Gatehouse for six interns, we typically admit half that many students to allow for extensive one-on-one instruction. Most applications

arrive in September or October, and we typically schedule a two-day working interview before the holidays. The internship programme begins with an intensive six weeks, learning the plant collection (primarily that portion under glass) and horticultural skills that include greenhouse management and plant propagation. Interns are also provided with a stipend and participate in most aspects of garden maintenance and public garden management, take study tours, and complete various independent projects. While making ready for the incoming class, we are also working with our current interns to complete the programme and help plan their next steps. In November and December, regardless of the weather, interns finish planting more than forty thousand bulbs, double-dig the vegetable plots they designed and maintained throughout the season, and – once the entire garden is cleaned up and mulched with (depending on the area) wood chips, leaf mould, or composted manure – they turn their attention to chores within the potting shed and prepare for their final exam in December. Graduation comes with a festive luncheon that signals the start of a well-deserved if brief period of work at a slower pace for all involved. Interns take away their hard-earned Stonecrop certificates, pots of bulbs, and some good English hand tools to help ease them into the next chapter of their horticultural lives.

A winter task that is near and dear to my heart is the cleaning of seeds that we collect throughout the year. In both my first and third years as a student at Kew, I spent three months in the seed room, so I place a high value on seeds and their dissemination, and view their cleaning as an annual rite of passage. Although the equipment was much more technical at Kew, at Stonecrop we use the same basic techniques of threshing, soaking, sieving and hand-separating. While much of the seed is used in this garden to ensure the continuity and purity of our own collections, a limited quantity is made available to our members and the public at large through our *Index Seminum* and *Index Rarium*. This programme is a true labour of love. We include more than seven hundred plant varieties described in careful detail and annotated with quotes from various (opinionated) garden writers we admire: Graham Stuart Thomas,

E. A. Bowles and Will Ingwersen. Recently, we have added photographs of our selections. Available on our website and updated each winter, these lists serve as fine general references as well as being a source for choice garden seeds.

Another sentimental winter chore is the chitting of potatoes. My mentor, Rosemary Verey, would get her certified seed potatoes from Scotland in January. As a child and beyond, working at Barnsley House, I would help her put them to chit in trays in the gunroom. Ours come from Maine, but we use the same kind of chitting trays and an identical process. Likewise, Rosemary and I would start seeds in January. As there wasn't room in her two small greenhouses, we rigged up lights and heat mats in her cellar. It was always somehow miraculous when tiny seedlings appeared in this subterranean setting, and we kept detailed records of when each variety did what, just as we do at Stonecrop. Rosemary – RV to my CB – was always coming up with ingenious solutions, embodying the notion that 'It is a sin to be dull'. For me, and I imagine my fellow staffers and our interns, seed-sowing and chitting continue to be acknowledgements that a new garden season is nearly underway.

On our hilltop, winter weather is utterly unpredictable. Last year, we had sixteen inches of snow in a late October storm, and very little snow thereafter. This October's mild weather was washed out with Hurricane Sandy's wind and rain. Average lows hover at or below 20°F, and in some years we can have more than forty inches of snow. This means that the winters aren't always peaceful, which was a shock when I arrived in the US. I had never before had to add snow removal to my winter repertoire. At Stonecrop, we often spend days at a time clearing it from roads, and we must also keep the greenhouses from collapsing under excess weight, particularly if the snow is wet. Our rewards include cross-country skiing, snow-shoeing, more time in the library (which grew around the Cabots' extensive collection of garden books), and group dinners that typically feature fruit and veg from the garden and game from the grounds. I have just finished making three-citrus marmalade with the interns, using Buddha's Hands

(*Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylis*), Meyer lemons (*Citrus* × *meyeri*), and trifoliolate oranges (*Poncirus trifoliata*) – a delicacy that will surely brighten our winter table.

The quiet that a heavy snowfall brings to the garden is extraordinary, and the brilliant white sets off the coloured bark of various cornus and willow species, including the brilliant *Cornus alba* ‘Ruby’, the crisp yellow-green *Cornus sericea* ‘Flaviramea’, and the showiest willows: *Salix alba* var. *vitellina* ‘Britzensis’ (the aptly-named coral bark) and two violet willows, *S. daphnoides* and the bluestem willow, *Salix irrorata*, a North American native which boasts stunning silvery-lavender winter twigs. Many of the fruiting shrubs and ornamental grasses discussed in previous articles contribute to our winter garden, but during these coldest months, the real glories are found under glass.

The Alpine House in winter is filled with tiny irresistible gems – a sea of blue *Lithodora rosmarinifolia* and the paler *L. oleifolia* surround an enviable array of ancient drabas and saxifragas, including the encrusted *S. federici-augusti* subsp. *grisebachii*, that grows wild on the slopes of Mount Olympus. A favourite of mine is the vigorous *Hepatica transsilvanica* ‘Elison Spence’, covered in rich, mid-blue double flowers with an inner ruff of petals much like some of the newer Japanese varieties. Other charmers include the tight, green rosettes of *Petrocosmea forrestii*, which in the best-grown examples form a spectacular spiral; the charming pink or white flowers of *Lithobryagma parviflorum*, the woodland star, native to the north-western United States; *Rupicapnos africana*, which looks like a tiny corydalis with silver-blue foliage and white blossoms tipped in purple; and *Ozothamnus selago*, a petite New Zealand shrublet clothed in scale-like leaves that looks like delicate green branched coral.

The winter perfume of *Daphne odora* and *D. bholua* fill the Pit House, where we keep collections of cyclamen, primula, dwarf bulbs (like our eagerly awaited *Narcissus viridiflorus* with its highly fragrant spidery blossoms in a remarkable emerald shade), heliobores, and fritillaries (including the delicate pink *Fritillaria stenanthera* and the larger, greenish-white *F. bucharica*). At Christ-

mas I treat myself by cutting hellebores for the table. They remind me of holidays spent at Kew, when I always worked for the extra money and the excuse to be in London. Rupert Goldby, a friend and fellow student and I would celebrate with a walk through the Woodland Garden where the Christmas roses always seemed to bloom on schedule.

The Conservatory is our winter garden, with each wing of the large, cross-shaped structure guarding its own treasures. The 'South Con' is the main area, housing the bulk of what we take outside each summer and which features South African bulbs such as a host of bright lachenalia, the Cape cowslip. The central section accommodates two wonderful and wonderfully fragrant winter-blooming buddlejas: orange *B. × lewisiana* and white *B. asiatica*. The Conservatory's North Wing is awash in camellias, while the East Wing is decidedly Mediterranean, hosting our collection of rose-maries, various olives, *Spartium junceum* (Spanish broom) and *Coronilla valentina* subsp. *glauca* (the glaucous scorpion vetch) – both a glorious clear yellow, and the magnificent blue spikes of *Echium candicans*, or pride of Madeira.

While we have long held a late winter tea (Spring Under Glass) for Stonecrop members, we wanted to share our treasures more broadly, so several years ago started our Spring Under Glass Week. More colourful and more fragrant than the famed Fashion Week in New York City, the public are invited to explore Stonecrop's display houses before the gardens open and be transported from the chill grey quotidian of a north-eastern winter. With list in hand, visitors can view more than six hundred note-worthy plants and observe our various techniques and stages of plant propagation, from seed-sowing and pricking-out, stem cuttings on the mist benches, butterfly leaf-cuttings of streptocarpus, to postage-stamp and vein-slashing leaf-cuttings of begonias. For us, Spring Under Glass is the perfect way to mark the end of winter, for the garden soon re-opens and our own Ring Cycle begins again.

In writing about Stonecrop through the seasons, I have been reminded of what I find important. It is deeply gratifying that we regularly grow plants that should not be hardy in our location or

that are notoriously difficult to propagate, but it is also rewarding to follow our interns over the years, some of whom continue to be involved here as consultants and volunteers. While we strive to be a garden for plant enthusiasts, and to train professional horticulturists of the highest order, Stonecrop would not be what it is without the Stonecrop family – its students, staff, members and visitors. Just as I carry memories of gardens and gardeners I have known, the Cabots and I always dreamed that some part of what we do in Cold Spring inspires members of this family in their own gardening lives. I hope that you will visit us and find *your* Stonecrop story.

Thanks again to Kate Kerin for her help in preparing this article.