

# The Sunday Express magazine

24 OCTOBER 1999

## I ESCAPED AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE

One woman's  
extraordinary  
story

## VITAMIN PILLS

Should you  
be popping  
them?

How to be  
the perfect

## GODPARENT

## Meet the new EASTENDERS

Why *East Is East*  
is the best film you'll see this year



PLUS: ANTONY WORRALL THOMPSON'S APPLE DELIGHTS / FICTION BY MEERA SYAL / FASHION LOOKS EAST  
HOME HELP WITH TESSA SHAW / LAURENCE LLEWELYN-BOWEN'S WEEK / UNEASY STREET / £1,000 CROSSWORD

## PLANT LIFE

BY ANDY STURGEON

# Protect and survive



As a child, I used to listen to older people harping on about how time flies, saying things like, "It seems like only yesterday it was summer. I don't know what happens to the days, blah, blah,

blah." And because I was just a kid and time certainly didn't fly - especially during double chemistry - I used to wonder what they meant.

Well, now that I'm older... doesn't time fly? It seems like only yesterday that it was summer. I don't know what happens to the days...blah, blah, blah.

Seriously, though, winter is lurking ominously around the corner and, as usual, I'm behind with everything. It's not that I'm lazy, you understand, I'm just rather busy and slightly disorganised. Quite lucky then, on the writing side of things, that I work best under pressure, doubly lucky that I also work best in the middle of the night, or most of my deadlines would never be met. Not so lucky for the garden, though. Let's face it, this is not the most exciting time of year for green-fingered frenzies. In spring and summer I can't keep away from it, sowing seeds and planting things, everything bursting into life and so full of hope. Well, it's a different story

now, isn't it? Raking leaves and padding about in the mud just isn't terribly sexy.

No surprise, then, that the lawn mower has eluded me for about six weeks and the leaf litter is building up nicely. One glance out of the window and I'm shamed by the view and live in terror of being unmasked as a charlatan by my neighbours. Well, I can't put it off any more so it's goodbye Mr Procrastination, garden here I come.

Most of the things that need doing now amount to putting the garden to bed for winter. There's plenty of cutting back and tidying up to be done, but the one job that can't be put off is protecting tender plants. I seem to have accumulated dozens of things that, even in these milder winters, teeter on the edge of hardiness. So I end up gambling with their lives because I often leave it until it's too late - just like I wait for the January sales before buying a winter coat.

Last year I was lucky because just about everything survived, even though I didn't get round to any special protection and just dragged anything in pots into what I laughingly called my garden room. In truth it was a ramshackle collection of timber, glass and corrugated plastic that leaned against the house. It looked okay but it was absolutely freezing and if the wind hadn't blown through it, it would probably have blown it down.

I suppose I could have insulated it with bubble wrap and made the whole thing look like an oxygen tent, but I just couldn't face it.

I've since moved house and now have only a small shed and a rickety cold frame, so this year I really will have to do things properly. My Japanese bananas will have their stems wrapped in straw or bracken, then I'll wind

some horticultural fleece loosely around that followed by a jacket of polythene with holes punched in it to let the plant breathe. I'll raise the pots off the ground on old polystyrene plant trays to keep their feet warm and so they don't get waterlogged. If I'm feeling generous I might even wrap them in straw and polythene. I planted one in the ground, and the leaves are already getting shredded by the wind but I'm going to take a gamble with this one and leave it unprotected, except for a bit of mulch around the base. There's a good

chance that the frost will cut it to the ground but there are already three offsets appearing at the bottom that could easily survive and reach over 7ft by the end of next summer.

I've also got lilies in pots that I'll lay on their sides and stack against the house wall to keep them warm and dry. There are a couple of chocolate cosmos planted in a bit of the garden that looks as though it'll be free-draining through the winter so they won't rot. They'll just need a generous mulch of compost or even sand to act as a duvet and

they'll be fine. I've got another in a pot - probably not ideal - but I'll wrap it in straw and it can take its chances.

I also have the added advantage of living in London now. Like any city it has an urban heat blanket which in the capital means that it's as much as 2 or 3 degrees warmer than the surrounding countryside. That may not sound a lot but to many plants it's the difference between life and death.

It's those extra few degrees that will allow my bottle brush to flourish and turn my osteospermums into evergreen perennials instead of tender annuals. I am also optimistic that a dozen ivy-leaved pelargoniums will survive.

The heat of London will also save me a few chores this winter. I won't have to tie up the leaves of my cordylines and New Zealand flax to keep out the cold wind and wet and I won't have to sow parsley for the kitchen window-sill because I'm confident that it will shiver its way through the winter outside and thrive again next spring.



London pride: the bottlebrush thrives in city warmth

Andy Sturgeon's column appears fortnightly.