

COUNTRY QUERIES

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GARDEN CHEER

Q It has been a long winter and for the first time I have appreciated how bleak the garden looks at this time of year, particularly as we have lost a few trees. I am keen to plant a witch hazel. Can you recommend a variety plus any other plants with colour during these long months?

MM, Oxfordshire

A Witch hazel (*Hamamelis*) has a blaze of flowers in winter and each variety has its own colour and scent. *Hamamelis x intermedia* Orange Beauty (pictured) lives up to its name by producing flowers of vibrant shades of orange through to red and the autumn foliage is equally colourful. Other varieties worth looking at are the *Hamamelis x intermedia* Ruby Glow and Pallida which have beautiful spidery flowers and a delicate fragrance. Plants with winter colour include *Comus sanguinea* Midwinter Fire which has orange/red stems and a fiery autumn foliage, and *Mahonia x media* Charity, an evergreen shrub with yellow fragrant flowers. *Skimmia japonica* Rubella has large clouds of red buds all winter that open into white flowers in early spring.



ALAMY



GETTY

WHEEZE OF THE MONTH

Leftover cheese from dinner parties or shoot lunches seems a waste and can cause frustration. Gather all the leftovers, grating any of the hard cheeses, and place in a large casserole with enough white wine to cover them. Place in a hot oven and melt. Stir well, and add some double cream and black pepper. Toast some stale French bread or similar, and ladle the cheese over it. This can be eaten immediately or put back in the oven for 10 minutes. At this point one can add any leftover cooked bacon or salami.

AC, Leicestershire

TAINTED TIPPLE

Q My old hip-flask is brass with silver electroplating. I initially washed the flask out with hot water but it tarnished the surface, so I have not done that again. After three years of use, it taints its contents with a metallic taste. I left some plum gin in it over the summer. Could this have eaten the metal inside? Is there a way to clean the flask or even have it replated?

TP, by email

A To clean the flask inside use a tiny amount of paste made from bicarbonate of soda and warm water. Gently scrub inside using a soft brush, and rinse well. If this doesn't improve the taste, the problem has been caused by the alcohol; this has eaten through the plate making it porous and pitted. Any



ALAMY

liquid inside will taste metallic. I have spoken to several silversmiths, all of whom say that it is not possible to replate the inside of a hip-flask because the neck is too narrow.

MARTINI ROYALE

Q In the February 2010 issue you mentioned a cocktail called a French 75. We have drunk this on all sorts of occasions from picnics to drinks parties but it's time for a change. Would you have another such simple recipe up your sleeve?

Jl, by email

A Equally simple and working on a similar line as a French 75, for those who like champagne but want something with an extra kick, is the Martini Royale. *The Little Black Book of Martinis* by Nannette Stone (£7 from Amazon) says that, "The Martini implies glamour, style and edgy wit. Without prejudice, it plays muse to heroes, hedonists, rascals and poets." Pour 1½ measures of ice-cold vodka into a glass, stir in half a measure of *crème de cassis* and top up with champagne, adding a twist of lemon rind to decorate. (One measure is 30ml.)



ALAMY

SPORTY SPICE

Q I was recently given a most delicious pheasant dish using a packet of Mexican spice mix. Being of a generation that doesn't use packet mixes, and concerned about their high salt content, I'd be grateful if you could recommend a DIY mix as I am always trying to find interesting ways of using up each season's game.

NH, by email

A A Mexican spice mix using supermarket ingredients is: 3 tsp each of cumin and onion powder, 2 tsp of chilli powder, cayenne pepper, dried oregano, garlic powder, crushed red pepper flakes and black pepper, and 1 tsp of ground coriander. Mix well and store in an airtight container. These can also be bought online from www.theasiancookshop.co.uk. Crushed red pepper flakes are easily made at home by cutting a red pepper in half and placing it



PHOTOLIBRARY

on a baking sheet in the bottom oven of an Aga or on the lowest setting of an oven for eight hours or overnight. Remove when brittle and place in a large freezer bag. Put this inside an old pillowcase, crush the pepper to the desired consistency with a rolling pin, and store it. Make sure the lid of the storage jar fits tightly.



ALAMY

PLUM GRAFT

Q I would like to propagate an old plum tree, variety unknown. Is it possible to grow a fruiting tree from the ground shoots or even from a stone, or does one need to make a graft?

SF, London

A To grow a strong plum tree it is advisable not to use the stone. It would probably grow if planted in compost but could be a weak strain. Ground shoots can be used. Often,

however they are suckers from the rootstock, which is a different tree, and you would end up with a wild plum or the wrong variety. The best way to reproduce your plum would be by grafting a bud to a rootstock. The latter is the most important factor in determining the vigour and eventual size of the tree. The St Julien rootstock is ideal for a large tree and the Pixy for a smaller one. These are available now from most good nurseries.

SERRATING CARVING STEELS

In the July 2010 issue we stated that the firm GJ Dennis of London was able to reserrate carving steels. The company is no longer able to accept this work as the member of staff who undertook it has retired due to ill health. At present the firm is unable to find anyone to continue this service.

MY Red-letter DAY

Rosie Nickerson

ONE of the best day's sport I've had was when we ambushed late-October grouse at Reeth in 2010. It had originally been planned as a driven let day, but got cancelled a few weeks before as the keeper was worried about stock levels. Then, in great excitement, a couple of weeks before, the keeper called us to say we could have a part-walked-up, part-driven day after all. His plan was to take us to parts of the moor which are rarely driven and track down those cannier grouse which had evaded the guns all season.

We hastily assembled our team of eight, none of whom would disagree if I said they'd been invited not for their "bag-filling" abilities but because they are old friends. They travelled from Wales, Shropshire, Lincolnshire, Hampshire and Yorkshire, and by 9.30am we were all set for the day, with eight beaters and assorted spaniels.

It was a very unusual day, which may be why it sticks in my mind. Each drive was unique and not even the keeper really knew whether it would work. He clearly relished manoeuvring us and his small team of beaters around to his requirements to catch out the wise old birds who made it their business to stay on the fringes of the action.

Each mini drive was planned with great precision and on the hoof, which is a tremendous feat in itself, with the keeper working out the exact wind direction and where the birds would be likely to fly, using his fieldcraft and grouse knowledge to the full. Alas, the armed section of his team didn't do justice to all this military-style planning.

For me, the memorable moment of the day happened when a pair of grouse flew across the gill, just within range. I managed, to my great surprise, to get a right-and-left. I was jumping for joy, as was my 10-year-old god-daughter, Elfie, who was acting as a cartridge-collector, when to our horror, we saw that the pair had dropped very near some picnicking hill-walkers a little way behind us, inside a disused lead-mine working. Luckily for me, it was the gun behind me (an incredibly charming land agent) who went to smooth any ruffled feathers, as his spaniel went straight in to retrieve them. Fortunately, the hikers entered into the spirit of it all and were very sporting about it.

At the end of the day the bag was 30½ brace and although we achieved an embarrassing all-time highest cartridge ratio of the season, we also managed to shoot a very high ratio of old birds to young, which is what it was all about. Judging from the charming thank-you letters I received, even from our teenage beaters, I think everyone enjoyed the day as much as I did.