

Roll out the barrel

If you are enjoying a glass of wine this Christmas raise a toast to the coopers. They are the workers who produce the barrels that turn an ordinary wine into something special. The cooperage tradition is said to date back over 2000 years when the Gauls mastered the production of barrels to produce their favourite Cerveoise beer and also for filling with pitch and hurling them onto Roman armies!

Coopers in France founded Corporations as far back as the 9th century. Today the market in the country is worth over €300million from about 550,000 barrels with 66% exported mostly to America, Spain, Australia and Chile.

Maturing wine in a barrel is considered noble ageing. An oak cask can bring out the best in wine, magnifying its qualities and aromatic traits. Time is the secret. Some 200 years pass from the time the tree is a mere sapling to the moment a glass of wine is poured.

The mystery of the barrel begins with Mother Nature. Powerful centenarian oaks from planted forests yield wood with perfect grain and golden colours which bring out the best of the wine's aromatic potential.

The oaks are left in the open air to dry until they are solid and resistant but still supple enough to withstand the heating and toasting process. Then the coopers' skills come into play. First the wood is cut into stave lengths then planed on the outside, slightly hollowed on the inside and tapered at each end ready to be assembled into the rounded barrel shape.

The staves are measured and sorted and the barrel is raised by positioning the staves upright with wide and narrow ones placed alternately to ensure balance. They are then held in place by a metal hoop.

Next comes the vital and spectacular steps of heating and toasting. The staves are heated by fire, steam or boiling water to help force them into the curved barrel shape.

Toasting fixes the shape and the heat unlocks the aromatic compounds from the oak.

The cooper's art, handed down over generations, rests on this skill of giving the barrel these aromatic qualities because they are what nurtures the wine's physical and taste



characteristics - vanilla, spices, toasted bread, hazelnut, etc. After this process the cooper fits the heads of the barrel, removes the hoops and replaces them with fine metal hoops having planed and sanded the outside of the barrel, which is then tested for impermeability.

The final role for the barrel is being gently filled with wine which will gently exchange with the wood becoming enriched with tannins while slowly being oxygenated through the barrel walls. Only 2% of global wine is cask aged which is probably why it's considered the most noble and prestigious.

Don't forget the garden...

With all the accent on Christmas it's so easy to forget the garden but don't. If you would like a decent display next year now is the time to prune and plant.

December is a good month to prune fruit trees and plant new ones. If the soil is dry or damp plant roses, rhododendrons, azaleas and lily bulbs.

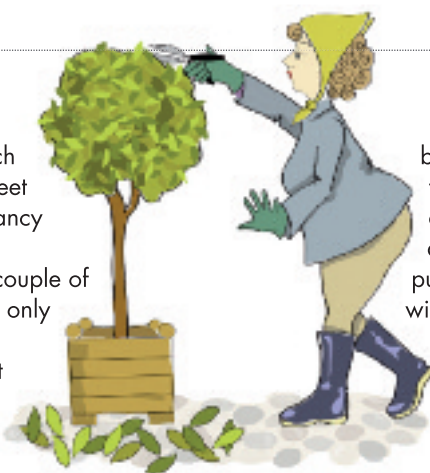
Deciduous trees and shrubs can also be planted but make sure the soil is firm around the roots so that any vicious winds, of which we have quite a few here, don't rock them before they have the chance to settle and establish new roots.

December is also a good time to

prepare a vegetable patch for your beans, peas, sweet corn and whatever you fancy growing next spring.

Indoors why not plant a couple of herbal plants that are not only attractive but useful. Aloe Vera is a pretty little plant that is very helpful if you have a cut or scratch that needs attention. A little rub with one of their leaves will provide relief. Keep this plant inside in a cool place and don't over water. In April it will produce red flowers on loose spikes.

Asparagus is a feathery, light green foliage used by florists for bouquets,



button holes, and floral arrangements. A delightful plant to put on your windowsill. Water sparingly. Cyclamen produces gorgeous pink, white, red and

mauve flowers throughout the winter. They cheer the house up but they need a humid atmosphere so stand them in a saucer or bowl of cold water. Always water from the bottom and not the top or the plant will rot. Stand in a place that has light.