

## *March In My Garden*

*(Andrew the Gardener)*

"It was one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light and winter in the shade."

Charles Dickens

In March we expect great things. The sap is rising, it's the beginning of Spring. The clocks change, we get a longed-for extra hour of evening light which will mean that by the end of the month it is still dusk well after 8 o'clock. Then around the 21<sup>st</sup> it is the spring solstice, when the day time becomes longer than the night time. We often expect a lot from March but don't often get it. Winter is still very much in control and often has the last laugh.

The sun, when it does shine, has real warmth and strength, enticing out the first bees, butterflies too; Brimstones, Tortoiseshells, Red Admirals and Peacocks all enjoy the early spring flowers. They hatched from their pupae late last summer, then wintered in the safe protection of a hollow tree, rocky nook or your shed.

Cornus Mas, the Cornelian Cherry, started flowering back in February and will continue on into April if the weather does not get too warm. It is a dogwood from central and southern Europe, with starry yellow flowers in little clusters attached as if by magic to the bare winter stems. I have half a dozen of these that I grew from seeds collected in Romania on a plant hunting expedition. In its native lands it produces abundant fleshy fruits that are made into delicious preserves. They seldom fruit well here, There are just not enough of the right type of insects around for effective pollination. From the same Romanian trip I also collected Lathyrus Vernus, a type of pea. It is really a woodland plant but is happy in the open, growing about 8" high and making a clump about 1ft across. The flowers last for ages and are an attractive combination of bright magenta and blue.

Next to the pea is Camellia "Winton". This is a hybrid, and quite different to the usual Japonica and Williamsii type of Camellias. It has willowy leaves and a very graceful weeping habit. It produces masses of small, single, sugared almond pink flowers from mid March to the end of April. Despite its delicate appearance it is far more robust than the Japonicas. Even the flowers stand a couple of degrees of frost. I have a Camellia Japonica "Shiro-otome" nearby that was completely defoliated by the pre-Christmas snow.

Primroses are getting into their stride now. They are the most promiscuous of plants and even the smartest florist's polyanthus soon crosses with any wild primroses in the vicinity, throwing up intermediate colour forms. I have a small collection of these "unplanned children" which come in a variety of pale reds and peachy russet shades. Another primrose I grow is "Lady Greer", a miniature with tiny limy yellow flowers on polyanthus stems and a really intense blue that my father grew from Blackmore and Langdon seed almost 50 years ago.

As the snowdrops along the stream begin to fade away they are followed by hundreds of wild narcissus, similar to a garden daffodil but much smaller, somehow more refined with paler, thinner petals. These seem particularly to enjoy our Devonshire climate, growing everywhere, especially in the rich, moist soils along the streams and rivers.

March is the month of catkins. Hazel, birch, alder and other trees too like the yew all depend on wind pollination – not surprising really, March being such a blustery month. Often as in October we get gales and rough weather, the Earth is tilting.