

In My Garden

(Andrew the Gardener)

Late February days; and now at last,
Might you have thought that
Winter's woes have past;
So fair the sky and so soft the air.

William Morris

A few days of milder weather can produce miracles in the garden. Daffodils have shot up showing their buds, as daylight noticeably brightens the sun is becoming stronger and warmer. Birds are singing at dawn and dusk, they are preparing their nests and will start egg-laying soon. Even though a return to snow, ice and frost is very possible everything at least moves in the right direction.

Moths have started appearing in front of my cottage. I keep a light on all night which often attracts them. Winter Moths, Mottled Umber and Early Moths all spend the daytime resting on the wall after a mild, dry night. Interestingly the females of these species don't actually fly at all; they are merely wingless swollen bags of eggs that after emerging from their pupae scurry up the trunks of trees into the branches where they exude pheromones attracting the flying males.

Almost overnight the Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis mollis*, unfurls its spidery crêpe paper flowers. I grow a variety called "Pallida" which as the name suggests has paler flowers than the yolk yellow of the type. Another I grow is called "Diane". This variety has fiery orange/red flowers. The Witch Hazels are amongst the few really cast iron winter-tolerant plants whose flowers survive whatever nature throws at them. They flourish in this loamy soil and relish the cool wet summers we seem to get in this part of the country.

Hellebores too are just starting to open. I love the fresh apple green of flowers and stems of *Helleborus foetidus*, our native Stinking Hellebore. The flowers appear from the leafy shoots that grew last spring and summer. The *Orientalis* types of Hellebores, or Lenten Roses, start stretching their flowering shoots upwards now although not really in their prime until next month. They are much improved by having last year's tatty leaves removed. I grow several different types that I have selected over the years for their variety of colour and open rounded shape. I would recommend only buying these whilst in flower as so often what are sold as "mixed seedlings" can end up rather disappointing with thin petals and dingy colours.

Not so tough but equally tenacious to bloom during the winter are two species of shrubby winter flowering Honeysuckles, *Lonicera fragrantissima* and *Lonicera standishii*. Almost identical they are more often seen as a hybrid daughter from their marriage, *Lonicera x purpusii*. From one parent she inherits creamy flowers whilst from the other slightly larger blooms and a semi-deciduous habit. A really cold spell of weather destroys any open flowers but there are always plenty of buds that will survive and replace them. The fragrance from these winter-flowering Honeysuckles is just as deliciously sweet and powerful as their summer-flowering cousins, one small spray in a vase scents a whole room.

Early crocus have started appearing, Hazel catkins have suddenly concertina'd out into lamb's tails, early primroses are starting, all sorts of shoots and buds are breaking but the flower that really queens it over all others this month is the humble

snowdrop. Down in the Valley they are happiest in the rich silty soil along the banks of the stream and in the woodland just over the bridge there are sheets and sheets of them covering the ground like a blanket of snow. If you look carefully you'll find some clumps with double flowers and very occasionally as along the road toward Halsdon a little clump with green markings on the outer as well as the inner petals. There are many, many different types and varieties that snowdrop connoisseurs and enthusiasts (or Galanthophiles to give them their correct name) have discovered but I think there is nothing more beautiful, gracious and dainty than a plain single snowdrop.

I must conclude by saying that during writing this I have had a rather strange displaced feeling as right now I am sitting under a palm tree drinking rum punch on the pure white sand of a tropical Caribbean island