

*April In My Garden*  
(Andrew the Gardener)  
A gush of birdsong, a patter of dew  
A cloud and a rainbow's warning;  
Suddenly sunshine and perfect blue  
An April day in the morning!  
HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

The one certainty we can expect in April is uncertainty. We are starting on a seasonal roller-coaster of every different type of weather, sometimes all within a few hours. The warm, summer-like spell of weather at the start of the month brought the swallows back wheeling around the village, alighting on wires. And along with the swallows oak, ash and beech came bursting into growth. The glorious sunny weather brings everyone out and despite mutterings of "We'll pay for this later" at the back of our minds we are all thinking of that elusive barbeque summer.

In the paddock opposite my cottage masses of dandelions, primroses, lady's smock and celandines attract orange tip, brimstone and the beautiful little holly blue butterflies. One of the main food plants for the orange tip is garlic mustard. Their inch long caterpillars can often be found on the seed pods which totally camouflage them, being the exact same size and colour. Sometimes they turn cannibal and start devouring each other.

If you look closely at a bluebell flower you will see a tiny wispy growth at the base of each flower. It is called a bract. I grow a form of Spanish bluebell, *Hyacinthoides Hispanica*, where these bracts are hugely elongated like great green whiskers 4 inches long. It is not exactly the most beautiful plant, but as a botanical curio it makes a really striking cut flower. Far more attractive is *Magnolia Stellata*; one of the first magnolias to flower its flowers are actually far more resistant to frost than other types, and even in my garden will stand a few degrees of air frost. Often sold as a dwarf it steadily grows into a small tree. There is a most magnificent specimen outside the antiques emporium at Umberleigh.

I have a collection of about twelve different brooms which start flowering now and go right through to the beginning of June. Planted on a south facing slope they flourish in poor stony soil with every drop of sunshine they can possibly get. The first to flower is "White Lion". It has very fine growths for a broom, and small pure white flowers over a six week period. Swaying in a breeze it resembles some exotic seaweed, or one of those fibre optic lamps.

This year is very good for plum blossom. My Damson and Greengage trees are covered in flower for the first time ever, promising delicious fruits this autumn, blackthorns too – millions of tiny white virginal blooms like great clouds all along our hedgerows.

At the top of the garden under a couple of sheets of corrugated iron live a colony of slow worms. They hibernate during the winter, but lifting one sheet this morning five of the creatures stared back silently at me as I invaded their world of warmth and safety. This is the time of year when so much happens in the garden, the beginning of a great vegetable rush as we sail into the new season. I could easily fill twenty pages of this booklet with such a busy month's happenings, Dear Editor, . . . .