

In My Garden – April
by Andrew the Gardener

“Oh, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day!
Which now shows the beauty of the sun
And by and by a cloud takes all away.”

Shakespeare

How fickle this climate is. Last year I wrote of April what a changeable month it would be (or should be), then every single day without exception was hot sun and blue skies! This year for weeks now I scrape the ice off my car most mornings then by lunch time I am in shorts and t-shirt sweltering in an unseasonal 70° of heat all at a time of year when heavy snows are still potentially likely. And then merely a week later the hottest parts of the country, 75° in March!, in Scotland! are under 8 inches of snow and I am working in coat and hat, and scarf with a dew drop permanently hanging from my nose, little wonder our climate obsesses us so much.

Whilst planting a scarlet-flowered quince amongst a small collection of Narcissus varieties I hope to make a striking spring feature out of, the most beguiling scent wafts on the breeze. It is a resin secreted by the leaves of the balsam poplar. *Populus malsamifera* is a fast-growing tree, mine is already 20 feet after only five seasons, not particularly striking though never unattractive. Its garden worthiness is the spicy sweet incense smell, having that same allure as newly baked bread, freshly laundered bed linen or that just-lit cigarette smell to an ex-smoker.

Lonicera tartarica, a shrubby honeysuckle from Siberia and central Asia, opens its dark pink flowers all along the stems that it grew the previous year. They are followed by tiny pale red heart-shaped translucent fruits that have the most charming elfin quality.

One of my tree peonies, *Paeonia suffruticosa* “Hoki”, is just beginning to open. The exuberantly flamboyant flowers, six inches across, are a startlingly brilliant shade of crimson with a mass of rich gold stamens at the centre. They always cause me a great deal of concern as the soft fleshy buds begin breaking at the end of January and I worry constantly that this over-sanguine behaviour will be thwarted by a sharp frost, literally nipped in the bud, but they are obviously far tougher than their apparent tenderness would suggest. There are five flowers this year and although the fleeting display will only last a few days, like a circus coming to town, wherever you are in the garden it eclipses all other flowers; the peonies constantly catch your eye and draw your gaze back to their dazzling spectacle.

Nearly as special as the peony are the flowers of *Prunus* “Ukon”, a Japanese flowering cherry. It is known as the Yellow Cherry, although the blossom is in fact a soft pale lemon-yellow green tinged with a pinkish flush, very pretty with the newly emerging bronze foliage. These blooms, almost 2 inches across, are semi-double hanging along the branches like a thousand dancing ballerinas.

April is the time when I audit the garden, taking stock of how well each plant has survived the winter ravages. This year due to neither excess of snow or frost everything has come through unscathed, after last year’s horrors it was a gentle healing winter. I keep a list of every tree and shrub with notes and comments about when each was planted, where I acquired it from and comments on how well it is growing. Today (15th April) whilst updating my records it is the most joyful and cloudless day and for the umpteenth time I have to mentally pinch myself to remember that this is actually my home and I am not just here on holiday. Then two perfectly beautiful Holly Blue butterflies float past.