

BREAKFAST WITH SAM

Susan Rowe

Aficionados of Bob Brown's catalogue will know that, as well as giving plants marks out of ten for garden worthiness, Bob also highlights those plants that are bomb-proof, suitable for dry shade, scented and/or suitable for cutting. These are exactly the things that those of us who garden with more enthusiasm than skill need to know. On the subject of cut flowers, Bob recommends that we pick a few flowers to enjoy them indoors and to be able to inspect them closely.

For some time I have followed Bob's advice and place a small offering from my garden on the kitchen table. Although my garden is small, I try to grow something of interest all year, so finding something to pick is not too hard. December is probably the most difficult month, but if the weather has not been too bad, *Hesperantha coccinea* is hanging on and a small vase of the foliage of *Eucalyptus archeri* is interesting, even without any flowers.

But when the year has turned, up come the snowdrops. In the garden these bloom for around 4 weeks. In a vase they last for only 4 or 5 days, but if there are plenty outside it is a great pleasure to have a few indoors. This is how I have come to be having breakfast with Sam for a few days in February.

I only have a few named snowdrop cultivars and these are the ones that are cheapest and most easily obtainable. From Bob, I bought *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott'. Bob's quantity is 'a full pot'... whatever that means. However, after five years the clump has increased magnificently; over 140 flowers, so some to pick.

Getting close up and personal to flowers is rewarding even without the use of a hand lens. As I grow older, I find that soil level is getting further away, and while I can still get down to weed and plant, it is not possible to get my head down to ground level (even if it were not wet and muddy in February) for close inspection of snowdrops, and certainly not to smell them.

A close look at *G.* 'S. Arnott' reveals a snowdrop about twice the size of *G. nivalis*, which it resembles, though it is said to be a cross between *G. nivalis* and *G. plicatus*. The 3 outer tepals are pure white, rounded and delightfully plump. The 3 short inner tepals have the characteristic notch above which there is a green mark on the outside; inspection of the inner side of these tepals shows that the green colouration extends right down to the throat of the bloom, but that the white veining gives this green surface a narrow-striped appearance which is unexpected. At the base of the flower a smart ring of short golden stamens surrounds an almost invisible pale green pistil. My sense of smell is not good, but even I can detect a fresh spring-like scent when I get my nose close enough. The fat outer tepals open wide in the warmth of the kitchen; then as the bloom ages they become narrower and the veins more prominent, giving them a ridged appearance and the shape of a propeller.

Enjoying my boiled egg and the snowdrops, I began to wonder who S. Arnott was. It wasn't difficult to find out. Sam Arnott (1852 - 1930) was Scottish. After leaving school, he joined his family's bakery business and assisted his mother in running it following the death of his father. He became a master baker and must also have had a good eye for business, for he was able to 'retire' in 1883 at the age of 32. This retirement was apparently on the grounds of unspecified ill-health; whether or not this was the case he lived for another 47 years, during which time he was known as a 'gentleman of independent means'. Throughout his life he was actively involved in local community politics.

After retiring, he bought a house on the Solway Firth and set about making a garden. His skill soon increased to match his enthusiasm. He wrote articles for horticultural publications and became an acknowledged expert on a diverse range of plants, though bulbs and alpine plants were amongst his favourites. He became a Fellow of the RHS in 1899 and moved to Maxwelltown in 1905, where he started another garden. He was generous, too. He distributed his plants to gardening friends, including the snowdrop which arose in his garden and which was known as 'Mr Arnott's seedling'. E A Bowles and H J Elwes were amongst the recipients of this seedling at some point in the 1910s. In 1951, the seedling was given the name *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott' at Mr Bowles' request and awarded the RHS Award of Garden Merit, which it still holds, and rightly so. Tens of thousands of this snowdrop still grow in the garden of H J Elwes at Colesbourne Park.

After around 100 years Sam's snowdrop is still one of the best and a splendid breakfast companion.

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