

## MY GARDEN IN SPRING

*Jo Goldsworthy*

Yesterday I was going to walk down to the town, and as it was a lovely sunny day I decided to go through the garden and out of the back gate. You know the saying 'pulled through a hedge backwards'? Well, that's the way I looked when I got out onto the street, because the *Clematis montana* and ivy on the arch over the back gate have blown over and are hanging into the street - trying to escape! I had almost to limbo out, giving a passer-by a bit of a shock wondering where this scruff had appeared from, a bit like 'The Secret Garden', and it could have been even more amusing when I disappeared into the hedge on the way back!

On my way back up the garden path, I had more time to look and enjoy. I'm not entirely convinced it's a good idea to leave the dead-heading of perennials until the spring, especially on the east coast of Scotland where it can be a 'bit' windy. Rather than attractive frosted heads standing in the sunlight, as you see in the magazines, we more often have a thatch of stems lying over the border, but how wonderful to see little gems of snowdrops, cyclamen, beautiful striped, blue primulas, various crocus and hepaticas shining through the thatch, with daffodils to follow.

As my garden is a little on the shady side, especially now the shrubs needed for my other vice of flower arranging have grown to be trees, I tend to grow a lot of another of my loves: hellebores, in all varieties. What a fantastic range of colours we have now, ranging from white through pink, to deep slate-purple, always something new to find. Not being a purist, I am happy to see the wonderful variety of shapes, including double, picotee and some with more upward-facing flowers. What a pleasure to see on a cold, windy February day!

Perfume is very important to me in the garden, so I have several varieties of sarcococca, known as either Christmas or sweet box, planted through the garden, with honey-scented perfume from their small white flowers filling the air. It can be a little overpowering if taken into the house, but outside it is fantastic, and as it is evergreen and has a tidy growth, it is a very garden-worthy plant. This year, the *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Livia' is flowering for the first time. It is planted in a large terracotta pot, as I haven't been able to decide where to plant it in the border. When in flower, I want it near the house to both see the beauty of the dark red flowers and enjoy their subtle perfume.

Just coming into flower is *Mahonia x media* 'Charity' with its pale yellow flowers scented like lily of the valley; another delight, even if the flowers are yellow. Another favourite, again with yellow flowers and not even scented, is *Stachyurus* 'Magpie', not in flower yet but the buds are formed and ready to go as soon as the weather gets a little warmer, or they are brought inside. Yet another tree in waiting is *Azara microphylla*, with its insignificant, lemon-coloured, pompom flowers with their wonderful vanilla scent. The problem is that this tree has grown so tall that I can no longer reach the branches. It isn't supposed to grow this far north, but I don't think it read the book!

*Viburnum x bodnantense* 'Dawn' has been showing lovely, scented, pink flowers on bare branches all winter, and now the leaf buds are ready to burst. *Viburnum tinus* is also in flower; this has grown rather tall and untidy and in need of pruning, but it does have beautifully scented white flowers all winter. *Viburnum x juddii* (I think) is just coming into flower, as is *Skimmia x confusa* 'Kew Green' - so more lovely scent - with other varieties of skimmia still in tight bud, just waiting for some sun to help them open, as is the *Camellia japonica* in the front garden. Also in the front garden, for the first time the *Skimmia japonica* 'Fructo Albo' has a couple of white berries on show: not a lot, I know, but the front garden is quite small and I made the mistake in planting it close to rather large *Griselinia littoralis* and *Pittosporum tenuifolium*.

As I walked through the garden, I was followed by a robin. He (or his friend) is always just a short distance away every time I go out, looking for treats. The blackbird flies off in panic if he or she thinks I am getting too close, and everywhere are signs that the blackbird has been digging in the border and kicking dirt onto the path. That's my story, anyway, to explain why the path is hiding. Or perhaps it's because in the autumn we are told to leave some dry leaves for the hedgehogs to make their winter nests. The fallen leaves were left, then came the rain and the leaves became a mulch, but everything goes full circle and now the birds are digging the path, looking for food.

One night last summer, at the same time, we had six hedgehogs of various sizes either within sight or hearing of the feeding bowl outside the back door. Although I know they can't all live in the garden, I am sure that at least one does; this is Herples the three legged hedgehog who appeared early last spring looking very small, pathetic and vulnerable. It was a hard decision whether to let nature to take its course or take him to the vet. We decided on the natural course, watching and making sure there was always plenty of food for him. By the autumn Herples had thrived, and in fact had become a bit of a bully, pushing other hedgehogs away from the food. And, happily, he came safely through the winter.

I hope that gives you all a taste of my garden in spring. I would never win a summer garden prize, or even one for a tidy garden, but I do like to think that I can go out at almost any time of year and find something that looks or smells good. And if I have flowers in the winter then that is helping the early insects.

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