

# Incidents without colour

Martin Spray

Here, in May, in the Forest of Dean, we are currently awash with bluebells. The sheets of blue *Hyacinthoides (Endymion) non-scripta* under oaks and beech are rightly famous. There is something entrancing about quintillions of flowers all alike. But they aren't. An occasional white spike interrupts the sea of amethyst; and very, very rarely, a pink one. The pattern presumably follows simple genetic rules.

In view of the obvious desirability of bright- and bold-coloured blooms, the liking many gardeners have for plants called *alba*, *albiflora*, and so on strikes me as a bit odd – if not perverse. Interest in white forms of blossom isn't new. In his thoroughly fascinating book, *The living garden*, George Ordish describes the evolution over four hundred years of a Kent garden. Its first maker, Mary Barton, 'made many visits to the woods searching out plants [it was legal in the sixteenth century], mostly violets, with larger flowers, deeper colours and stronger scents, [and] every now and then a white flowered violet would be found'. She used the white ones to edge her violets bed, and amongst her gardening friends Barton Whites became very popular. Ordish identifies her violets as *V. odorata* and *V. canina*.

As the review of *A gardener's guide to native plants of Britain and Ireland* [Vol.33 No.1] shows, 'wild flowers' or 'native plants' have much potential in the garden, nowadays as much as in Mary Barton's time. Purists will use them in their wild forms, though most gardeners are tempted by 'enhanced' cultivars. And an impressive number of these cvs are whites. A wander around my own garden reminds me how keen I am to have some of these 'blank' flowers, and also how fickle some of them are. Here are brief details of a few of them. Most of them are British natives.

One of my all-time favourite plants, Herb Robert, *Geranium robertianum*, normally pink, has a wild *album* form, and a diminutive, light-green-leaved cv. 'Celtic White'. They all offer delight – though the plant is prolific, and I have to weed out large numbers



*Chamaenerion angustifolium* 'Album'

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of pink-flowered plants throughout the year. *Album* usually keeps the red pigment in stems and leaves, but has nearly white flowers. ‘Celtic White’ is a clean green, lacking the redness, and is much less rumbustious, but all three forms look after themselves quite happily.

Another reasonably restrained – at least, easily controlled – plant is what I have always called Blinks<sup>1</sup>, *Claytonia (Montia) sibirica*, Pink Purslane. It is tolerant of wet, dry, sunny or quite deeply shaded situations, where, over a long season, it looks delightfully cheerful. It is also edible.

I had a colony of this naturalised American, from seed from plants found wild near Sheffield many years ago. They have the normal flowers: pale pink, with darker veins. It seeded merrily around without needing encouragement. A dozen years ago, it was joined by seedlings from a pure-white-flowered parent found lying on a woodland path on Hampstead Heath. Var. *alba* joined in the fun, as a minority partner of the pink type. However, I realised about four years ago that hardly any pink-flowered *Claytonia* remained – and there still are very few. I transplant the odd pink individual to keep some patches pure white. I don’t, though, have enough to recreate the predominantly pink patches I used to have.

My experience of *Claytonia* in the wild is that it is nearly always pink-flowered. My experience of *Silene dioica (Melandrium rubrum)*, Red Campion, in the wild is that there is a spectrum from white to red, but almost all are describable as pink-flowered. In the garden, it spreads itself around as a very welcome, if sometimes over-enthusiastic, filler with an impressively long season. There used to be a sprinkling of whites amongst the pinks, but these have disappeared. An attempt to have white champions by cheating, by growing White Campion, *Silene latifolia* subsp. *alba*, has twice failed: it doesn’t like conditions here, though it grows well in a friend’s garden a mile away. I had a single plant last year, and it has survived the winter. I have seen nothing of the hybrid which ‘occurs commonly wherever the parents meet’, according to Clive Stace’s *New flora of the British Isles*.

Another very welcome DIY native filler of gaps, rather easier to pull up than the campion, is the Wood Forget-me-not, *Myosotis sylvatica*. Its flowers are the usual bright and light forget-me-not blue. Its story is similar to the champions’. It was in the garden before we moved here, and twenty years ago there were several small patches of white-flowered individuals; then for several years there were none. Now, a very few whites are back. Trying to boost their number with bought seed seems to have failed. So does the attempt to add pinks to the population.

Next, a confusion. Several things are called Dog Violets, and I think what I have are more like *Viola riviniana* than *reichenbachiana* – but who knows? The typical plants have flowers of the blue end of violet, and they have colonised the garden from the wild. From somewhere, I have acquired lookalikes with deep but slightly cloudy pink flowers – the colour is very close to that of bilberry yoghurt. They are quietly charming. I now

<sup>1</sup>This is properly the English name of *C. fontana*.

have lots of these, and few blues. I don't think I've ever seen *riviniiana* in white dress, but there is a 'white flowered' form listed in the *Plant Finder* that I could explore.

With the other native *Viola* that has settled in the garden, the pattern is partly reversed. Local hedgerows and wood-edges are well populated with Sweet Violet, *V. odorata*. As per textbook, their flowers are almost as commonly white as violet, and in a few places there are deep pinks as well. Sometimes, all three grow together, delightfully. All three colours found their way here; all seemed to settle in. Two decades later, I see only the white form.

I have wondered about the violets for several springs; about the Honesty, *Lunaria annua*, I have been puzzled only since this year's 'false spring'. The common purple-flowered form was here before us; to these we added a white form (name unknown). Purples always outnumbered whites. Purples always started the honesty flowering season. Except in 2012. This year we have had a magnificent show of whites for months, and they look, in mid May, like going on for a while yet. A modest show of purples has at last joined them – but the plants are small. I could find almost no purple flowers until about mid April, and they do not look like catching up. Meanwhile, there is a flush of spring-germinated seedlings, as usual.

All these examples are of plants that have effective reproduction by seed, and several have short lives. Some of their characteristics appear to wax and wane in the populations over short periods of time. Some characteristics just disappear! The last white-flowered plant I want to mention is longer lived, uses vegetative reproduction very effectively and, once invited to your home, is inclined to outstay its welcome.

Nonetheless, the white form of R.B.W.H. is a splendid spectacle – and I used to grow it, after finding a patch of it on a Yorkshire roadside dump. Like the white Red Campion and (nearly) the pink Pink Purslane, white Rosebay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion* (*Chamerion* and *Epilobium*) *angustifolium*, is no longer evident in my garden. It is as invasive as the typical pink-flowered form, so I (eventually, reluctantly...) dug it all out. I miss it, though: it is one of the British flora's beauties.

It does what many white-blossoming plants do: it shines in moonlight on summer evenings. And that, of course, for some plants, is important. I'm not sure it's the case with white 'minorities' such as the R.B.W.H., but a number of moth-pollinated, night-flowering plants exploit this feature.

Amongst those quintillions of bluebells in the forest, I suspect a different explanation for the occasional white and the rare pink flower. Bluebell bells are the homes of fairies ('tis said), and I think the pinks and whites are simply the most des. of the des. res. 🧚

**Martin Spray** shares a garden in the Forest of Dean with his wife, who would prefer not to have to pull up so many wild flowers before they seed where they are not wanted. Martin is an editor of *Ecos*. *A review of conservation.*