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An unusual white-flowered primrose seedling

I've just finished wrestling with a new book on my Spring Cottage garden, so for the last year I've been trying to capture some of its magic in words and on camera. Luckily I've been aided by a photographic maestro, Marianne Majerus, who has captured every season with terrific aplomb. It's not been easy, for 2016 was poor in so many respects and summer was a particularly

disappointing, cool affair in the wonderfully named village of Cold Aston.

My job, aided by the *Best Beloved*, has been to photograph the insects and pollinators because the book is all about gardening without any pesticides, slug bait or herbicides. It's not preachy, honestly, but it is possible to garden with the planet in mind once you understand the concept. I've been trying

to capture the living element, but I've discovered that bees are far easier to photograph than beetles. I must have fifty blurred shots of these long-legged runners, the Usain Bolts of the insect world. The book, *The Living Jigsaw*, is out next spring and I thank Kew Publishing for allowing me to write it!

A year writing about your own garden concentrates the mind wonderfully well and



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The woodland garden at Spring Cottage, Cold Aston

The learning curve

Val Bourne



Hepatica 'Harvington Beauty'

I've realised that the spring garden is the part I love the most. The chapter starts by saying 'If I were carried up into the air whilst wearing a blue gingham dress and a crisply starched apron, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, the one bit of garden I'd like to be sucked up into the vortex along with me is the spring garden, for it engages my spirit more than any other area. When it's cold and grey, and the days are at their bleakest, I can see promise all around me and it excites me.'

My spring garden wasn't exactly planned. It lies low and close to a spring which emerges on the other side of the stone wall. Although I intended to grow snowdrops there, they had other ideas and they sulked. It's a salutary reminder that plants have the final say when it comes to gardening. We're not really

in charge. They do their own thing despite us, thriving where they want to and not always where we want them. The snowdrops have gravitated up the garden, a slight oxymoron so I hope that Sir Isaac Newton will forgive the mention of gravity and up in the same sentence.

The twenty or so named wood anemones, planted as perfect partners for the snowdrops, have thrived and proved very thuggish and squeezed out the snowdrops that had survived. They also hybridised, so when I was asked if I still had the full twenty by the person who had sold them to me, I was forced to admit that I had no idea because the bees had intervened.

In fact the woodland garden was serendipity from the beginning, because the hellebores were moved in November 2005 and planted within weeks without any planning as to where the plums or the greens should go. I didn't know which was which and it would be another year before the first woody plant was even thought about, let alone planted. Gardening, by real gardeners, is often a topsy turvy affair, and I do know that one is supposed to plant woodlanders under an established canopy. Ten years on there is one.

Most things that work well in the woodland garden have been lucky accidents, rather than design. The fact that *Hepatica x media* 'Harvington Beauty' does so well here

would be enough, its green-centred mid-blue flowers appearing from green cushion-shaped buds that lie on the soil surface in anticipation. The dainty flowers tremble on dark stems and close by, quite by coincidence, there are almost-black hellebores to match the stems and flatter the hepatica flowers. I always cut away the hepatica foliage in early December, when I do the hellebore leaves, because the liverish colour jars in spring and spoils the flowers. However, by the time the hepaticas flower the wood anemone foliage has pushed through to frame them.

'Harvington Beauty' is a bit of a mystery. It was named by plantsman Hugh Nunn who discovered it in the village of Harvington near Evesham when he moved in about thirty years ago. No one knew the name or where it had come from, but a large stand under apple trees was threatened by building activity so Hugh rescued some. I have an unknown tall bearded iris taken from a skip in my village. The lady who skipped it now wants a piece, although I haven't confessed to my crime. When does rescue become theft?

To go back to Harvington, one of Hugh Nunn's neighbours was Elizabeth Ballard, the daughter of Helen and Philip Ballard. Helen famously bred hellebores and they inspired Hugh's Harvington hybrid strains.

Helen Ballard's father, Ernest, hybridised hepaticas and produced *H. x media* seedlings in 1916 using *Hepatica transsilvanica* as the seed parent with *H. nobilis*. His most famous cross, 'Ballardii', has large flowers with blunt tips to the end, I think! It's slow to bulk up and hardly ever seen now. I have often wondered whether 'Harvington Beauty' was also a Ballard hybrid because he had many customers from Worcestershire. If only plants could talk.

Back in my garden, serendipity also united *Erythronium californicum* 'White Beauty' with *Polystichum setiferum*. The two marry together really well because the rusty bristles on the polystichum stems, which give this genus the name of poly-stichum meaning many-bristled, catch the brown necklace on the inside of the ivory-white tiffany-lamp flower. The new fronds extend themselves as the erythronium flowers appear and, if the spring is cool and damp, these two are in a limbo-land state, freeze-framed. You notice that I do not name this fern, because fern names are a step too far for this gardener.

I have tried to grow exotic Asian woodlanders such as *Disporum* but they do not thrive for me. *Disporum longistylum* 'Night Heron' and 'Green Giant' have never

resurfaced following cold, wet Cotswold winters, despite being planted twice. Asian plants require wet, warm summers as my numerous trips to Japan have taught me. Their rainy season is very wet and one of the most hilarious moments of my life was watching an outdoor Shakespeare miscellany by a British company. Their rendition of 'For the rain it raineth every day', from Twelfth Night, was delivered in a torrential downpour that saw one unfortunate actor slip over. The lights flickered round puddles of water and the actors, in clothes that stuck to their bodies in the all the wrong places, ad libbed by adding every word they knew for rain from drizzle to sleet. The Japanese audience may have been puzzled, but they were too inscrutable to show it.

Asian woodlanders also require good drainage in the winter, almost impossible here; in much of Asia the cool drying winds and dry winter climate ensure this. Many also grow at altitude on water-shedding slopes where snow lies in winter. I once flew to Matsuyama on Shikoku to see my daughter, who was living there. I was confronted by a pile of washing she'd saved especially for her mum. I strung it up overnight, in February, and it dried by morning even though it wasn't warm. It was surreal.



Erythronium californicum 'White Beauty' with *Polystichum setiferum*

Crûg Farm Plants grow and sell Asian woodlanders wonderfully well, but their nursery is not far from the coast at Bangor in North Wales. As I discovered when the same said daughter was at university there, their winters are far less savage than mine in the Cotswolds.

Primroses, though not nearly as exotic as Asian woodlanders, love our damp, cool winters and my collection of exciting primroses (Barnhavens, Cowichans and those Irish ones raised by Joe Kennedy) form the breeding stock and produce some great seedlings. I watch for interesting offspring and revel in the fact that nature has the upper hand in my garden, rather than me. 🌸