

# Black frost and green shoots

Chloris

I have never known anything like it! Since November last year until this March, we have had scarcely one day without precipitation of some sort.

November, and the winter started wet, wet, wet. Twigs and branches dripped, paths squelched underfoot, and every doorway turned into a veritable Niagara. The hens drooped miserably under the strip of green fabric intended to protect them from scorching sunshine and ignored their scattered corn, that was in turn ignored by the listless



Snowflakes (*Leucojum vernum*) and winter aconites herald our emergence from winter recession

blackbirds. Down by the river, the water hens sat tight on the bank, staring with supreme indifference at the surging brown water. The cat, curled up as tight as possible in the airing cupboard, glared at me with dislike, obviously aware that I was responsible for all this misery. Who else but the Universal Provider?

At Christmas a season of severe frost succeeded the season of flood: every night the temperature dropped like a stone; every morning the reluctant daylight revealed a silvered world. Such is not, on the whole, a world friendly to the plants – or, for that matter, to me.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Is shrunken hard and dry.  
And every spirit upon earth  
Is fervourless as I.<sup>1</sup>

We had some snow – a few inches – but not enough to form the sort of early blanket that traps residual warmth underneath and stays long and thick enough to keep it there. I doubt if by this time there was any warmth anywhere. To call this a spell of severe frost is to understate the case. Savage it was. I do not think I can remember ever feeling so cold, or resorting to so many layers of thermal undergarments.

<sup>1</sup>*The darkling thrush*, Thomas Hardy

On the low retaining wall behind the back bedroom, which even in summer the sun barely reaches and where the ground water seeps down to the open drain that skirts the bankside, small glaciers had formed and showed the dark, furtive movement of tiny trickles making their way under the ice to the edge of the stonework, where, reaching the air, they encased in glass the tiny primula seedlings, the *Mentha requienii* and *Saxifraga cymbalaria*, and the flourishing colonies of liverworts which in the present conditions have grown incredibly fat and prosperous. When they are not infesting the surfaces of plant pots but occupying their own territory, with plenty of moisture, liverworts can develop a sort of attraction – plump and glossy, with trim, flat edges, neatly patterned surfaces, and sex organs that look like tiny parasols. In the present conditions I cannot altogether acquit them of an air of triumphalism.

By late February, the temperature had risen a little by day. The mud in the doorway of the hen enclosure became virtually liquid. It was difficult to keep on one's feet and to keep shoes on feet rather than leave them embedded in the claggy clay to which our soil seems everywhere to have reverted. Some of the wet-growing primulas were simply low heaps of rotted brown matter. It was difficult to be sure that there was a firm growing point somewhere under each small heap of sodden disintegration. But the winter-flowering heaths, strong and springy, were providing patches of cheerful colour in the heather beds: 'Kramer's Rote'<sup>2</sup> was particularly robust and showy; and the remains of last year's flowers on the *Erica vagans* looked pleasant, their pale brown colour, suggestive of dry matter, contrasting with the dark, soggy remains of the bog primulas which, one felt, ought to be enjoying these conditions. One primula that is neither dark nor soggy is *Primula capitata*, which has already formed some neat green rosettes that look very delicate but appear more redolent of spring than the usually robust and thrusting *P. florindae*, which as yet shows nothing but the remains of last year's cut-down flower stalks.

Now, in mid-March, if you get safely to the bottom of the garden, things look a bit different. It is true that the ranks of the crocuses are sadly thinned, even *C. tommasinianus* and *C. flavus* – where no protective covering of grass intervened, the ravages of mice are almost total. But the snowdrops have been splendid, and their profusion on the slopes is best appreciated from below, while the snowflakes (*Leucojum vernum*) have formed a carpet of glossy green and white on the little grassy haugh down by the river. I am very fond of the spring snowflake, whose proportions are to me so much more satisfactory than those of the summer one with its much longer stems yet its flowers no larger. The winter aconites, now somewhat time-worn, still make a golden scattering on the grass. But here and there, little dark, spotted leaves are appearing, heralds of the first of the erythroniums, *E. dens canis*; in a few days their elegant little lily-like blooms will be opening to herald our emergence from winter recession into spring recovery, with trout lilies and tulips, and the daffodils "that come before the swallow dares". 🐣

<sup>2</sup> *Erica x darleyensis* 'Kramer's Rote'