



Fig. 1 *G. plicatus* 'Wendy's Gold'.

## Getting the measure of snowdrops

Tim Ingram

If you can see the world in a grain of sand, then how much more do you see in a snowdrop? In the wider world it can be that political correctness stifles critical evaluation ('Politics fills me with doubt and dizziness'<sup>1</sup>). Within the world of plants and gardens a kind of botanical correctness may do the same thing. The Kew Plant List recognises

19 species of snowdrop but galanthophiles often grow many hundreds of cultivars (figs 1 – 6), almost all derived from just three or four species.

Of course I am being hypocritical – we ourselves must grow well over a hundred different snowdrops – because the world of snowdrops illustrates that personal connection between

people and plants which is often experienced by gardeners, whether or not underpinned by botanical analysis. For many of us the fascination of plants is in their names and where or who they have come from, and the more you know about them the more you come to really value them.

Snowdrops light up the garden and the imagination, as well as the intellect.

There is no better measure of this than the outstanding *Snowdrops – A Monograph of Cultivated Galanthus* (2006) written by Matt Bishop, Aaron Davis and John Grimshaw, which it's good to see on the shelves of our local library.

Variations in natural populations of plants have always attracted attention, and when the variants are of familiar and well-loved garden plants such as primroses, anemones, narcissus, hellebores or snowdrops, they draw the observant and critical eye



Fig. 2 Our display of a few of the hundreds of cultivars at Faversham market.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Williams Buchanan



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Fig. 3 *G. 'Wasp'*

even more. It's a small step then to the friendships that develop from sharing these plants. And the result is the proliferation of snowdrops that we see today.

Many people delight in viewing snowdrops in their natural state, in woodlands, which tells us most about the conditions which are conducive to their multiplication and spread. Like bluebells and anemones they can grow in their tens of thousands and colonise large areas, one of the glories of the British countryside in winter. All these plants are signs of long-established woods, often in existence for many hundreds of years. The skill of gardening is to conjure up this natural habitat in our personal surroundings, when observing the individual snowdrop becomes even more enticing (figs 7 & 8).

This must be the underlying reason for the excitement generated by



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Fig. 4 *G. 'Barbara's Double'*

events like *The Ultimate Snowdrop Sale* held in late January at Myddelton House, Enfield, the home of plantsman E A Bowles (fig. 9). If you're prepared to spend a significant amount on snowdrops it's a sign that you're willing to invest in your garden, your own place, and the enlightenment you gain from it. Many who attend buy only a few snowdrops; as at specialist plant fairs and shows, the attraction of the event may be the opportunity to share experience rather than compete for plant booty. In this way the interest in snowdrops resembles the 'florists' of past times; small-scale 'societies' formed around craftsmanship.

To someone who is not a galanthophile the prices snowdrops command may seem ludicrous, but they are often no more than a good meal out, and the pleasure and companionship are similar.



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Fig. 5 *G. elwesii 'Mrs McNamara'*



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Fig. 6 *G. plicatus 'Gerard Parker'*



Fig. 7 The 'woodland setting' in our Kent garden is under the cobnuts and, here, under the apples.

For me the thrill of growing snowdrops is really just as much about their setting as about their details, and the cost of new cultivars encourages me to give more thought to and greater care of the parts of the garden where they are grown. The same is true of so many other woodland plants – genera such as *Trillium*, *Erythronium*, *Anemone*, *Epimedium*, *Helleborus*, *Cyclamen*, and the list goes on... Many of them are only a little removed from natural wild species, if at all, and they bring this charm into the garden; any sense of design is subordinate to their

essential nature. As a garden matures and trees and shrubs give shade, woodland plants become more and more appealing and appropriate.

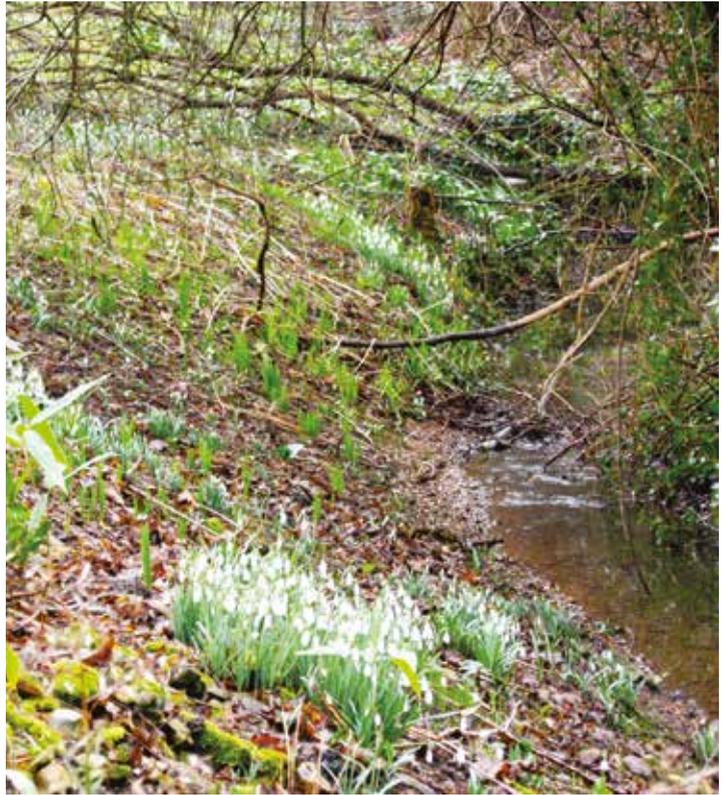
The fascination snowdrops exert was seen in the long queue at Myddelton House. Behind us were a mother and daughter who had grown snowdrops for only a few years, but who were excited at the prospect of purchasing rarer varieties. We talked about snowdrop gardens, few of which we have ever had the opportunity to visit even though (or perhaps because) we have grown snowdrops

seriously now for fifteen or more years. I was told that I must visit Colesbourne and Rodmarton Manor, and somehow I got the feeling that they'd only be a start! Also in line were two Belgian galanthophiles who had visited us the day before and were going on to see the well-known grower Colin Mason. Maryese and Brigitte have both grown snowdrops for many years, and Brigitte's garden has been the subject of a good French TV programme, *Jardins et Loisirs*. All of us were looking for recent cultivars that stand out from the crowd.

We simply enjoy collecting and gardening with snowdrops.

The prices paid for snowdrops can distort their role in the garden, but the cost does focus the mind on the best ways of growing them, and from this must come a closer appreciation of plants in general. We try to recreate in the garden something of the plantings that you find in nature but with a much greater diversity of species. And because snowdrops come first in the year, they set the scene.

Woodlands, like meadows, become more and more species rich – and stable – with time and declining fertility. In his wonderful book *Woodlands* (2010), Oliver Rackham looks closely at the ecology and history of British woods and the relative fragility of their floras, developed over centuries. We can never achieve this in a garden, particularly because the coarser weeds of fertile soils constantly need to be removed, but the very fact of trying will result in a closer understanding of natural environments. The challenge, along with the tapestry of plants, makes gardening with snowdrops and other woodland plants so truly satisfying. 🌱



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Fig. 8 The woodland stream at Myddleton House.



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Fig. 9 Part of the queue at Myddleton House. The gentleman in blue is Chris Horsfell, Head Gardener at Colesbourne.

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