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## The learning curve

Val Bourne

Fig. 1 *Hepatica x media* 'Harvington Beauty'

One of my golden rules is to try to have something out throughout the year, and certain plants are iconic for me because they regularly appear at strategic points, heralds of the season.

In January, on the brink of snowdrop time, I love to see *Galanthus elwesii* 'Mrs Macnamara'. It's a substantial snowdrop that produces many flowers per clump and flowers reliably every year – how I wish I could say that about all my snowdrops – and it has substance and durability. Many earlier snowdrops such as 'Peter Gatehouse' and 'Fenstead End' can be damaged by the weather. The real Mrs M. was Dylan Thomas's mother-in-law, though apparently they hated each other. Her grandfather owned two large estates in County Clare so this snowdrop is possibly Irish.

February is a very variable month, but in most years a recently bred hybrid hellebore, *H. 'Anna's Red'*, is in flower. Raised by Rodney Davey of RD Plants in Devon, it was a breeding breakthrough because the larger than usual flowers are a rich ruby red and the foliage is frosted in silver-pink, far too good to be cut off in December. I've found it reliably hardy and durable despite its being raised by micropropagation. It's been widely available in the past, but the danger of micropropagation is that plants go as quickly as they come owing to problems in production. It's part of the Marbled Group, which includes 'Penny's Pink'. Ashwood Nurseries ([www.ashwoodnurseries.com](http://www.ashwoodnurseries.com)) usually have both.

By March my garden is striding ahead and in years

following a cool winter I get a swathe of large blue flowers, similar to those of wood anemones, which are *Hepatica x media* 'Harvington Beauty' (fig. 1). The foliage is cut away in late-autumn so the flowers pop up through bare earth. They love a mild spring but suffer if the winter's too mild. It was discovered in the village of Harvington near Evesham by Hugh Nunn, creator of the Harvington Strain of hellebores. A keen plantsman with a love of woodlanders, he spotted it in an overgrown garden and rescued it before builders gutted the house. No one knew what it was so it was eventually christened 'Harvington Beauty'. It may have been raised by Ernest Ballard (1871–1952), raiser of other hybrid hepaticas, because his daughter lives in the village.



Fig. 2 *Polystichum* fronds and *erythroniums*

There is a similar hepatica named 'Ballardii'; both are hybrids between two European species (*H. nobilis* and *H. transsilvanica*).

*Erythronium californicum* 'White Beauty' (fig. 2) is as cheap as chips, to use a Jamie Oliver term. It's readily available and that's a good sign because it means it's a doer. There's too much emphasis on the rare and unusual if you ask me, and as one nursery friend

always says, "they're rare and unusual for a reason, Val." This April-flowering erythronium has green leaves scaled in brown and the cream flowers have an inner necklace of brown stamens visible when the sunlight shines through. They're snow-melt plants so love a cold winter followed by a cool spring with ample rain. Last year's dry, cool spring after a warm winter led to tiny flowers.

May is possibly everyone's favourite month, full of promise rather than disappointment! E A Bowles, the famous galanthophile, wrote 'if a fairy godmother or a talking fish offered me three wishes, one would be to have the clock stopped on a fine morning towards the end of May'. Bowles held tea parties on his Tulip Terrace on his birthday, May 14th.

My May favourite, *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine', is a recent introduction, bred by Tim Crowther of Warburtons Nursery in Sussex; it flowers

from May to November, here mingling first with grey-blue amsonia and then deep-blue agapanthus. It's a complicated double cross that began life in 1988. First *G. coccineum* and *G. rivale* were hybridised and then the best seedlings were crossed with *G. chilense*. Many gardeners, particularly ladies, dislike orange, but it's a touch-paper colour against blues and purples.

In June and July my borders major on pastel colours, with flecks of darker plums, purples, deep blues and magentas. I have a passion for hybrid *P. lactiflora* peonies and my absolute favourite of the many I grow is lavender-pink 'Monsieur Jules Elie', because the flowers change colour, developing a silver edge to their frillier petals as they mature. It's one of the last to flower, and scented. Bred by Crousse in 1888, it has bombe-shaped flowers, green foliage, and slightly lax stems 3ft tall. It's the fragrance I love: it morphs from sweet-rose to coconut on a hot day.

Peonies need cold winters to encourage flower buds so the mild winter of 2015–16 diminished my flowers greatly. The cool spring saw a drop in butterflies and the hummingbird hawk moth, so I'm hoping for more this year. The moth's preferred plant is valerian (*Centranthus ruber*), and it's possible to have it in flower from April until the end of October if you deadhead the spent flowers regularly and also shear it back in mid-July.



Fig. 3 *Centranthus lecoqii*

My June favourite is a Moroccan valerian, *Centranthus lecoqii* (fig. 3), acquired through Bob Brown of Cotswold Garden Flowers (www.cgf.net). In 2015 we watched the moths feasting on the last day of October.

In August, I know autumn's not far behind when I see *Colchicum autumnale* 'Nancy Lindsay'. She's full of flower and yet the foliage, the scourge of growing most colchicums, is well behaved and fades quickly. Her neat flowers are violet-mauve champagne flutes. There's always a surprising number of them and they go on for three weeks or so. Nancy (1896–1973) became a good friend of Hidcote Manor's Major Lawrence "Johnny" Johnston, and when he died in 1958 he left his estate in France, Serre de la Madone, to her. Local legend has it that she was furious that Hidcote didn't become hers.

There's nothing relaxed about my next choice. It's referred to as the radio mast by the best beloved who isn't a fan. It's a huge evergreen sea holly called *Eryngium pandanifolium* 'Physic Purple' (fig. 4). On warm autumn days it attracts lots of tiny flies, but it's structural and somewhat exotic. The hundreds of tiny heads glow red in winter sunshine. The foliage on mine is light green, but I've seen



Fig. 4 *Eryngium pandanifolium* 'Physic Purple'

others in hotter spots such as the Chelsea Physic Garden, where it came from, with much greyer foliage.

My bête noire is November, a grey dreary month, so I'm always cheered by the red-spotted white bells of *Clematis cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Freckles'. It's tucked round a sheltered corner and climbs over a tree peony. It would probably prefer a south-facing wall but the cottage has no foundations so wall plants are not encouraged.

The plant I always long for in December is *Narcissus* 'Cedric Morris', a short, green-backed yellow which Morris dug up from a Spanish roadside in a freer age. Morris went back, as others have, but the road had been widened and it's not been seen in the wild since. It's like hen's teeth in the nursery trade, but it was popularised by Morris's friend Beth Chatto and the nursery sells a few. It's not fast to bulk up but here it often appears on Christmas Eve, a promise of things to come. 🌸

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Val's latest book, *The Living Jigsaw*, is reviewed on page 70.