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Fig. 1 The area under fruit trees became ideal for woodland plants.

Forty years ago, when our garden at Copton Ash, in Faversham in Kent, was just a field of old cherry trees, the first plantings my father made were five rows of apples grafted on to dwarf rootstocks (fig. 2). For many years we kept them free of grass and weeds, with limited success, by using herbicides or mulching with straw. Forty years on, the nature of the garden has changed: it is no longer an open grassy field but a semi-woodland with a

great variety of plants and a different philosophy of management. We no longer use chemicals any more than we have to, and the decision was taken some ten or fifteen years ago, after spending too much time constantly weeding under the trees, to turn this supposed necessity into a virtue and grow more ornamental plants there instead! This has been done step-by step, and two of the rows have yet to be completed, but they provide

an ideal place for a wide variety of woodland species and make the loveliest of all parts of the garden through the winter and spring (fig. 1).

Our new approach coincided with our growing interest in snowdrops, so around the initial row of apples we buried hundreds of nearly ripe seed capsules of *Galanthus nivalis*, which made tufts of seedlings, flowering after about three years, and now a decade or more later they've spread and self-seeded all along under the trees (fig. 3). This success prompted us to plant bulbs of more choice snowdrops in the other rows, though some of these have done less well, preferring the drier summer conditions of more truly woodland areas. Nonetheless, in autumn our anticipation of the next spring's snowdrops provides the incentive to clear as much of the previous year's vegetation as possible from under the trees so



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Fig. 2 Labour-intensive orchard management, 1979.



Fig. 3 Snowdrops made themselves at home



Fig. 4 Long beds with *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing', *Brunnera macrophylla*, fumitory, foxgloves and aquilegias.



Fig. 5 Great Dixter Plant Fair is a good place to meet nurserymen and women. Here, Elizabeth Strangman is second from the right.



Fig. 6 *Helleborus viridis* in late December.

they can be shown off to best advantage, and the whole panoply of spring woodlanders then follow in succession before the weeds really begin to emerge in late spring and summer. The plantings then turn into mini-herbaceous borders invaded by *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing', *Brunnera macrophylla*, fumitory, foxgloves, aquilegias (fig. 4) and later the odd annoying sow-thistle and nettle. Interestingly, this underplanting hasn't affected the fruit yields: in autumn we often get a glut of apples, more than we're able to use and store, and on occasion we've borrowed a friend's apple press and made juice.

Our fascination with woodland species dates back to regular visits to that famous Kentish nursery, Washfield at Hawkhurst, and to Elizabeth Strangman and Graham Gough who worked with her; it's delightful to

still meet Liz at events such as the Great Dixter Plant Fairs which bring together so many fine gardeners (fig. 5).

Hellebores have been a theme in our garden for as long as or longer than snowdrops, and we grow many under the apples, including a good selection of the true species. They can begin to grow and flower very early and then keep going for several months. The picture of *H. viridis* emerging was taken in late December (fig. 6), very welcome in mid-winter, and three months later this is still a sturdy, free-flowering clump in full prime. Some have been grown from seed supplied by the great plantsman Jim Archibald, who with his nurseryman partner Eric Smith was responsible for introducing renowned hybrid strains such as the heavily spotted 'Cosmos' in the centre of my composite image of flowers (fig. 7).



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Fig. 7 Hellebores.



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Fig. 8 Perennial forget-me-not *Brunnera macrophylla* fills the gaps.

Another, a very good robust picotee-flowered plant, came from the breeding carried out by Kemal Mehdi at Hadlow College, a close friend of Elizabeth's. Hellebores, like snowdrops, make lasting connections between gardeners.

There can hardly be two plants that combine better than *G. plicatus* 'Wendy's Gold' and *H. odoratus* growing under an 'Orlean's Reinette' apple. Both genera can take nearly any winter weather thrown at them, even the blistering cold and arctic winds of the 'Beast from the East' this March, which severely damaged or killed very many evergreens in our garden.

As the snowdrops fade and spring arrives, the full richness of the plantings develops. Fig. 8 shows the perennial forget-me-not *Brunnera macrophylla* filling the gaps earlier occupied by snowdrops with a haze of blue that persists into June. *Brunnera* can be an aggressive

companion – in other rows self-seeded plants are removed where they threaten to overcome more choice woodlanders – but it makes very good weed-smothering ground cover in dry soils and looks wonderful in combination with the sulphur-yellow umbel *Smyrniium perfoliatum* that also fills any empty spaces in early May. As the hellebores continue flowering the woodland aristocrats, erythroniums and trilliums, come into their own; *Tulipa orphanidea* flowers around the young shoots of *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* (front cover); the dark ferny leaves of 'Ravenswing' fill any room in between; and epimediums produce their flush of fresh new leaves and first flowers (fig. 9).

After a Snowdrop and Hellebore Day in February, the grass is mown, the edges cut, and we're ready to open the garden for the NGS several times during the



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Fig. 9 *Epimedium* 'Spine Tinger'.

spring to show how much happens before Chelsea!

Our typically very dry, warm climate in Kent gives the woodland plantings a dishevelled and overgrown air later into summer. It can be hard to imagine just how lovely they were in spring, and yet paradoxically this diversity of woodland species is well adapted to the loss of light and moisture that only returns with the autumn rains and leaf fall.



Fig. 10 Wood anemones

The great charm of sylvan plants is that tapestry of foliage and flower they make early in the year. An amazing variety of plants can play their parts between February and May, so I will pick out a few to look at more closely, some common and well known but others new and less familiar.

Snowdrops set the pulse racing and one of the later ones, the Irish 'Straffan', flowers among the young leaves of the umbel *Smyrnium*. By early April the bare soil is filled. *Arum italicum* 'Marmoratum' has become too much of a good thing, seeding very freely yet not to be dismissed in very shady, dry spots near big trees. It throws up some very fine leaf forms as well as striking late-summer fruits, so it's tolerated in some areas and as much as possible removed in others. This is the best time to enjoy the exquisite detail of different forms of woodland

Fig. 11 *Trillium kurabayashii* centre stage.

anemones, and we add to their variety steadily year by year (fig. 10). *Trillium kurabayashii* intermingles with the new foliage of aquilegias and epimediums and the flowers of *Brunnera* (fig. 11). There are moments of drama as *Bergenia ciliata* flowers and we think we should plant more of these Elephant's Ears. And there is that excitement of returning from a specialist Alpine Garden Society Show at RHS Rosemoor in Devon with a boxful of new plants that need a home under the trees. Later into spring, *Disporum* and *Polygonatum odoratum* 'Red Stem' (fig. 12) spear through lower groundcover species, adding subtlety of form and flower.

There are variations on a theme – if anything at all, this is what you learn as you make a garden. As you discover plants grown by other enthusiasts your own garden is constantly

enriched. That variety of woodland anemone can be added to by other species: *Anemone trifolia*, which came by exchange with a gardener in Finland; *A. flaccida*, from Japan, with its delicately marbled leaves; and the more robust Chinese *A. prattii* (fig. 13), sold by the famous alpine nursery on the Scottish borders, Edrom, which introduces so many choice plants to horticulture.

There are also disappointments. Paul Barney of Edulis Plants had the most beautiful form of *Disporum cantoniense* 'Blueberry Bere' for sale at the Summer AGS Show at Wimborne in 2016, but as it's emerged each spring since it's been nibbled away by molluscs and never become established. Gardening includes realism as well as display and show. There are surprises. *Podophyllum versipelle* 'Spotty Doty' (fig. 14) has formed a reliable and striking specimen



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Fig. 12 *Polygonatum odoratum* 'Red Stem'.



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Fig. 13 *Anemone pratensis* flowering in mid-May with *Disporum leucanthum*.



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Fig. 14 *Podophyllum versipelle* 'Spotty Dotty'.

in our dry summer garden, where other species and forms of this unusual genus have always failed.

'Spotty Dotty's' curiously flamboyant flowers, hidden under parasols of leaves, are unexpected and hard to place with its relatives in the Berberis family. Yet here is another aspect of gardening: as you grow plants, you learn of their relationships and taxonomy and can become intrigued by 'what's in a name'. Along with *Podophyllum* come *Epimedium*, *Jeffersonia*, *Vancouveria*, *Diphylleia*, and rarer plants such as *Achlys* and *Ranzania*, which William Stearn describes in such scholarly manner in his monograph on

the herbaceous *Berberidaceae*. Many of these are as, or more, fascinating for their foliage as for their flowers, and epimediums in particular reveal a familial resemblance to *Berberis*. The Berberis family is close to the *Ranunculaceae*: both arose relatively early in the phylogeny of the flowering plants, and both now provide some of the loveliest woodlanders we can grow in the UK.

Few later-flowering woodland species really cope well with our typically very dry summers – in 2018 we had only a few millimetres of rain through June and July. There are a few exceptions: *Roscoea*; rare new introductions such

as the umbel *Dystaenia takesimana* from Marina Christopher; the rather wonderful *Persicaria* 'Indian Summer', introduced by Michael Wickenden at Cally Gardens; and a delicate dwarf pink form of *Clematis heracleifolia*. As the story of 'under the apples' comes to a close, the drama in the garden moves to Mediterranean plantings in sunnier places. We remember the moments in the spring when the woodland plantings take the breath away, and all the weeding and pruning that is necessary for half the year is more than made up for by the beauty and interest of the other half. 🌸

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