Temple Balsall Snowdrop Sunday: Introducing Snowdrops

Sweet type of innocence, snow-clothed blossom
Seemly, though vainly, bowing down to shun
The storm... (John Clare)

Even during the dark days of winter, we look forward to the first grey-green spears of the early-flowering *Galanthus nivalis* which was also known to country people as the Snow Piercer, Candlemas Bells or February Fairmaids. Pearls of furled flowers open to reveal the central undifferentiated petals and sepals patterned with green. Snowdrops may have been named from ear-rings or after droplets of milk. **(Snowdrops 1)**

Has the snowdrop always been with us, or was it introduced in the 16th century? Or have these flowers been around much longer, if not mentioned before then, since snowdrops are often found associated with medieval religious sites, as in Blacklow Hill in Warwickshire (itself a place of Saxon burial) to which Piers Gaveston was brought to be beheaded in 1312. Where his blood fell, snowdrops sprung up, or so we are told by the monks who had come to take away his body. A profusion of the flowers can be seen to this day. Are they the direct descendents?

The genus Galanthus comes from two Greek words meaning a milky flower. Up to 20 wild species have been identified, the most recent also being the rarest, not to say endangered: *G. panjutinii* was only so classified in 2012 and is found in a few select sites in Georgia and in Russia, areas now threatened by the Winter Olympic Games. Not all species flower in late winter. *G. reginae-olgae* resembles the common plant but will flower in autumn in the Greek mountains. It was named after Queen Olga of Greece, the grandmother of Prince Philip. The bulbs enjoy a warm summer over which to ripen. There is a giant snowdrop, *G. elwesii* which, though flowering at the usual time, often produces specimens up to 23 cm tall with broader leaves and large flowers, the three inner segments of which have more prominent green blotches than the more common kinds, though individual specimens can vary widely. The species was named after the Victorian plant-collector, Henry John Elwes, whose Cotswold home, Colesbourne Park, is still famous for its swathes of snowdrops today, though this particular species does not grow there anymore.

The early flowering habit of this plant provides welcome nectar for early bees, as well as giving us a slender preview of spring, even though they need to appear well before then to compete with more fleshy plants and really belong to the late winter scene which has its own beauties. In some years they can be unusually late, delayed by wet and cold spells which do not encourage growth or flowering. In other years they can be conspicuously precocious, only a month or two behind the last lingering autumn flowers of the year before. Happily, they are robust and persistent and once settled on a site they like will soon become dense. Sometimes the splash of milk-white is an indicator of previous human habitation, as they are keen to colonise gardens but can maintain themselves long after cultivation has gone. They are particularly associated with monastic or holy sites, and were probably valued for their medicinal and magical properties. This may be the case at the churchyard and adjoining Nature

Reserve at Temple Balsall, where there is an active policy of conserving and enhancing the existing profusions, which include both single and double-flowered variants of G. *nivalis*. **(Snowdrops 3)**

Might the Knights Templar have brought back bulbs from Asia Minor? Are the clusters we see today direct descendents? Plant clumps can be very long-term survivals, and, where records exist, it is astonishing how far back particular local plant configurations can be proved to have persisted at a particular spot.

Among more local rarities is *G. "Warwickshire Gemini"* (an elwsii cultivar) which sometimes lives up to its name in having twin heads.**(Snowdrops 4)** Another is *G.elwesii "Jessica"* found by Phil Cornish near Wroxall Abbey, Warwickshire, in 1997 and named after his wife. The green-marked outer segments are not smudged but look as though deliberately painted on. *G. "Lapwing"* was found at Lapworth, again by Phil Cornish, from among a mixed population. The inner segments have an "X" mark and it is regarded as among the best of the new cultivar snowdrops being easy to grow. **(Snowdrops 5)**

Further afield *G.nivalis "April Fool"* only flowered in April in the garden where it was first discovered but does in fact appear earlier. *G. "Pusey Green Tip"* has a raggle-taggle double flower and was first seen growing along the Thames near Pusey. *G. Nivalis "Anglesey Abbey"* has very bright green leaves with no trace of grey and was first identified as a non-clonal cultivar at the National Trust property of that name. These are all increasingly available from good nurseries and some can be seen growing in our snowdrop Cultivar border in the Walled Garden (Beyond the church yard.

(Snowdrop 2)