

Ramblings of an Older Gardener by Dr. Keith Lamb

As the years roll on one may not be able to do as much physical work in the garden. On the other hand, one can look back and note which plants have done persistently well with minimal attention and consider whether these should be propagated in greater numbers to become the mainstays of the seasonal displays.

To start with spring, the snowdrops can be naturalised under shrubs and trees. There are several other species besides the ordinary *Galanthus nivalis* that will thrive with out special care. Of these the Crimean snowdrops (*G. plicatus*) *G. elwesii* and *G. byzantinus* have done well in our garden. With them come the winter aconites. We prize the cultivar 'Guinea Gold' for the more intense golden-yellow colour of the flowers. This one flowers just a little later than the ordinary kind and does not seed around, but forms clumps that can be divided every few years.

Another genus that has given us lasting pleasure is *Erythronium*, the so-called Dog's Tooth Violets. *E. californicum*, 'White Beauty' is one of the most vigorous. It bears creamy coloured flowers, petals somewhat reflexed after the manner of a cyclamen. Like all the erythroniums it has attractive foliage, faintly marbled in this one with lighted coloured veins. *E. tuolumnense* has plain but lovely green leaves to set off the golden flowers. *E. hendersonii*, with violet coloured flowers, is our favourite, though not so willing to increase as the others. *E. dens-canis* is a little disappointing in that, while prolific with offsets, the flowers are not so abundant. Perhaps we should plant it deeper. *E. americanum* is a failure as it has produced almost no flowers despite almost filling a bed with its leaves.

The mention of cyclamen is a reminder that here we have species that range from the fully hardy to the frost tender. The earliest is spring is *C. coum*, with deep pink or white flowers. Though it has persisted for many years in our midland garden it has not spread as freely as it did in our former garden near the coast. *C. repandum*, though, has been a triumph, spreading quickly under the beech trees to form a carpet of scented carmine-coloured flowers every April. Then, of course, there is the familiar *C.*

hederifolium of autumn. One can never have enough of this, or indeed of any cyclamen.

Luckily, we started with trilliums years ago, as they are slow to flower from seed. Planted near the beech trees *T. chloropetalum* has spread to cover quite an area. The three-petalled flowers vary from white through purplish to red, the upright narrow petals sitting on a ruff of three leaves. These leaves are interestingly varied, plain green or mottled. Curiously, the seedlings more commonly in the adjoining gravelled drive than in among the plants. Of the other trilliums the lovely double form of *T. grandiflorum* shows some promise of becoming a notable feature in the garden. It increases by forming clumps which can be divided occasionally.



T. chloropetalum in Hestor Forde's garden
Photo, P. Tobin



Galanthus nivalis. Photo, P. Tobin

With the trilliums we grow another American plant, the bloodroot (*Sanguinaria Canadensis*), so named from the red sap that oozes from a damaged root. The frail crocus-like flowers are set off by the unfolding leaves of glaucous grey. These flowers are so short lived that the double form is more desirable as the blooms last longer. Either form, though, is lovely and no trouble to grow. It is a woodland plant in nature and looks appropriate in such surroundings in the garden. Indeed, all the plants mentioned so far look well under trees. In gardens of modest size it should be possible to contrive a copse of smaller growing trees – rowans, the smaller cherries, maples etc. – to accommodate them as ground flora.

In the rock garden also are genera of smaller plants that can form permanent plantings with few demands for upkeep. In early spring there are the scillas and chionodoxas. Among the trouble-free plants the pulsatillas must rank high. Indeed, once established they are best left alone. The furry buds open to enchanting flowers in mauve, pink, red and white. In Ireland the celmisias can be lasting features, to the envy of our English friends. Best of all is *C.* 'David Shackleton' with its glistening white leaves. Of the alpine primulas, *P. pubescens* 'Mrs. J.H. Wilson' and *P. marginata* have persisted with us for many years, as have the ramondas and haberleas, even when planted on the flat rather than in the north-facing crevices usually advised.

The saxifrages offer several kinds of permanent value. Many of the kabschias and englerias call for careful attention, but not *S x apiculata*. This forms slowly spreading mats of spiky leaves covered in spring with yellow or white flowers. Sharing any sunny spot can be the encrusted saxifrages, available in endless size and

form of leaf. The clumps are attractive at all seasons, but especially so when bedecked with sprays of, usually, white flowers. Forms with yellow, reddish or spotted flowers are available.

Much more could be written on the theme of permanent plants, but every gardener can draw up his or her list of indispensables. These will form the main picture, but no real gardener can refrain from trying some more demanding species, few or many according to age and capabilities. A gardener always has something to look forward to. Perhaps the favourites will do even better next season, or perhaps the latest acquisitions will settle down.