

Confessions of a Galanthophile

By Carolyn Walker



I have always loved snowdrops. I loved them so much that I set my seasonal clock by them. When they bloomed, it was spring no matter what the calendar said. When we purchased our property in 1983, it came with thousands of common snowdrops, *Galanthus nivalis*. Many of my original snowdrops are on an open south-facing hill and often start to bloom at the beginning of February. That's when spring began for me. When they bloomed, I would put on my warmest set of work clothes, head out to the garden, and leave the winter doldrums behind.

In 1991, I began taking the Longwood Gardens certificate courses, and in 1995, I took the wonderful Hardy Spring and Fall Bulbs course. It was there that I learned that the snowdrop world wasn't comprised solely of *Galanthus nivalis* but included other enticing varieties. My snowdrop world soon expanded to include additional cultivars and species easily available from bulb companies.



The common snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis*, multiplies prolifically and combines beautifully with Italian Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum italicum* 'Pictum'.

But I still wasn't a galanthophile, a British word describing gardeners obsessed with snowdrops. In my pre-galanthophile days, I thought (and I shudder to put this in writing) that once you had the double 'Flore Pleno', and the giant *G. elwesii*, and the green-tipped 'Viridapice', and the glossy green-leaved *G. woronowii*, you pretty much had the snowdrop field covered. The rest all looked the same, didn't they? What were those collectors getting so excited about?

But one day, I realized the error of my ways and was seized by the galanthophile obsession to collect every snowdrop cultivar I could get my hands on. Actually, it didn't really happen in a day—more like years. It started with reading the snowdrop sections in the (old) Heronswood catalogues. Dan Hinkley was a master at plant descriptions, and I ordered a few new cultivars each year. However, my fate as a galanthophile was sealed when I visited Charles Cresson's garden during snowdrop season. Charles can make you see and appreciate the finest distinctions in plants, and he is so generous with his treasures.

Now I had the wild up-facing double 'Blewbury Tart', and 'Magnet' with the fishing line stem, and the drop-pearl earring shaped 'Atkinsii', and the classic 'S. Arnott', and the rabbit-eared 'Sharlockii', and . . . they



The common double snowdrop 'Flore Pleno' is very pretty.

all looked different to me. I only have 34 varieties though, hardly qualifying as a collection in the eyes of UK galanthophiles who have easy access to hundreds of named cultivars. Luckily (or unluckily) unusual snowdrops are rarely available in the U.S. due to their endangered spe-

cies status, saving me from creating a system to keep track of hundreds of snowdrop cultivars in my garden. The British snowdrop 'bible', *Snowdrops: A Monograph of Cultivated Galanthus* by Matt Bishop, Aaron Davis, and John Grimshaw (Griffin Press 2006), describes over 500 cultivated varieties, and the authors admit that it is now out-of-date, and a second volume is underway.

But there are rational reasons aside from pure plant lust to justify collecting snowdrops, and I want to share the three that motivate me: bloom time, ornamental characteristics, and history.



The double snowdrop *Galanthus nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* 'Blewbury Tart' always looks like it's having a bad hair day.



The fall-blooming snowdrop 'Potter's Prelude' flowers in November and December and is quite vigorous.

Season-extending Snowdrops

First, if you love snowdrops, it is natural to want to extend their season, especially to parts of the year when your garden is winding down. With a modest selection of some of the varieties available in the US, you can have snowdrops blooming from early October into April.

For example, *Galanthus reginae-olgae* starts blooming in my garden in early to mid-October and lasts for about four weeks. Just as it goes by, the first flowers of *G. elwesii* var. *monostichus* 'Potter's Prelude' appear and continue through December. The giant snowdrop, *G. elwesii*, begins flowering in early January, while 'Magnet' and 'S. Arnott' bloom in late January and February before the common snowdrop, *G. nivalis*, takes over for late February and March. The double 'Flore Pleno' and *G. woronowii* will provide flowers in later March and even into April depending on the weather.



The desirable snowdrop 'Lady Elphinstone' appears to be the only double yellow cultivar.

Ornamental Characteristics

With bloom time covered, I must admit that ornamental characteristics are even more important to me. Snowdrops flower at a time of year when I have the luxury of studying them closely without being called to a competing garden task or by a plethora of other gorgeous blooms. As Charles Cresson said in a 2006 Horticulture interview, "No matter how impressive the big picture, in a great garden even the smallest vignette is a work of art. True beauty is in the details." It is no coincidence that many of the most impressive gardeners in the Delaware Valley collect snowdrops, a plant that epitomizes elegant detail. However, in my own garden, I want to avoid collecting for collecting's sake—each snowdrop must be distinct enough so that I can identify it without looking at the label.

With that qualification in mind, I have sought out distinct snowdrops to admire in the off season, and I will mention only a few of my favorites here to illustrate my point. You may think all snowdrops look alike, but flower shapes and colors can be very different and intriguing. I admire 'Kite' with its incredibly long outer segments (petals) and 'Augustus' for its plump and quilted flowers. I am fascinated by double snowdrops and particularly cherish



The yellow snowdrop 'Wendy's Gold' is quite rare and therefore pricey.

'Lady Beatrix Stanley' for its elegance, while I laugh every time I pass by 'Blewbury Tart' having a bad hair day. No one can disagree that yellow snowdrops are distinct, and I treasure my 'Wendy's Gold' and double yellow 'Lady Elphinstone'.

There are other very different snowdrops I would add if I could get them. I would love to have an elegant pocoliform type like 'Bridesmaid' where the inner and outer segments are equal in size and pure white.



The double snowdrop 'Lady Beatrix Stanley' is as elegant as the name implies.

I think virescent snowdrops with delicate green shading over the outer segments are lovely. I have my eye on 'Green Tear' but at £360 it's out of my league. Angular snowdrops where the outer segments are shaped and marked

Sources

Carolyn's Shade Gardens (C. Walker)
carolynsshadegardens.com/2012-snowdrop-catalogue/
carolynsshadegardens@verizon.net
 2013 online catalog available in January.

The Temple Nursery (H. Lyman)
 Box 591
 Trumansburg, NY 14886
 Send \$3 for a catalog.

Brent and Becky's Bulbs
 877-661-2852
www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com

Black Hog Horticulture (John Feliciani)
 16731 New Rd
 Lewes DE 19958
jfelic@dmv.com, 610-742-4971
www.blackhogfarmstead.com

Places to See Snowdrops

Winterthur
 5105 Kennett Pike (Route 52)
 Winterthur, DE 19735
 Well-established, naturalized collection of snowdrops. Reopens for the spring on March 1, 2013.

Ithan Valley Park
 642 South Ithan Ave
 Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
 Open dawn to dusk, an old estate garden with masses of common snowdrops in February and March.

Snowdrop Events

Winterthur Bank to Bend Lecture by Alan Street, English snowdrop expert and head nurseryman of Avon Bulbs, Saturday, March 9, 2013, 11:00 A.M., preregistration required. www.winterthur.org

"Snowdrops and Other Winter Interest Plants" Seminars by Charles Cresson, February 2013 (exact dates to be announced). carolynsshadegardens.com/2012-winter-interest-seminars/



The double snowdrop 'Ophelia' and other doubles were selected by an eccentric English gardener who named them after Shakespeare characters.

like the inner segments are very distinct, and 'Trym' and 'South Hayes' would show up well in any garden. Finally, orange flushed snowdrops like 'Anglesey Orange Tip' are said to stand out from the crowd.

History of Snowdrops

Which brings me to the third reason, after bloom time and distinct ornamental characteristics, I would add a particular snowdrop to my garden and to one of the things I find most fascinating about snowdrops: they are the only plant that I would purchase as much for their colorful history as for their looks. And how do I find out about their captivating

Companion Plants for Snowdrops

My favorites are Italian arum, hardy cyclamen, winter aconite, snow crocus, Siberian and Tubergen squill, silver-leaved lamium, heucheras, hellebores, camellias, and evergreen ferns.

lineage? I consult *Snowdrops*, which details much of the background of the varieties it covers. I wish all genera had books this information-packed and well written dedicated to them; it would make plant shopping so much more fun. I also do internet research and participate in the Scottish Rock Garden Club Forum on Galanthus where galanthophiles from all over the world gather to obsess.

It is in *Snowdrops* that I discovered the interesting background of 'Straffan', the third oldest snowdrop cultivar still in existence. During the Crimean War 1853–1856 (famous for the Charge of the Light Brigade and Florence Nightingale among other things), UK troops fought in the Crimea, a peninsula extending from the Ukraine into the Black Sea and prime snowdrop territory.

When the war was over, soldiers brought back snowdrops collected from the battlefields, an arresting image. Eyre Chaloner Henry Massey, the fourth Baron Clarina, owner of Straffan House in County Kildare, Ireland, returned home with a clump of *G. plicatus* from the Valley of Tchernaya. His head gardener, Henry Bedford, selected 'Straffan' from this clump.

Many historic snowdrops are associated with the British aristocracy or with famous horticulturalists like E. A. Bowles. So it was with great interest that I researched the history of the Greatorex double snowdrops, 'Ophelia' and 'Hippolyta' among them, hybridized in the mid-twentieth century by the enigmatic snowdrop breeder Heyrick Greatorex of Brundall, Norfolk, England, apparently an ordinary, untrained home

gardener. Greatorex was a commissioned cavalry officer in WWI, who was wounded at Lagincourt and received the Victoria and British Medals. He served in WWII as the Captain of a Home Guard platoon and eventually became reclusive, living in a railway carriage in his garden. His legendary series of double snowdrops lives on.



The third oldest snowdrop cultivar still in existence, 'Straffan', has a venerable history.

Quirky snowdrop tales abound. It is obvious that I find every aspect of snowdrops

intriguing, from their unusual bloom time to their gorgeous flowers to their colorful history. You may not want to increase your collection beyond the more common varieties, but I hope you will now understand the basis of the galanthophile addiction.



Carolyn Walker is the owner of Carolyn's Shade Gardens in Bryn Mawr, PA, a nursery specializing in showy and colorful plants that flourish in shady gardens with a focus on snowdrops, hellebores, miniature hostas, ferns, and native wildflowers. For more information, visit her blog/web site at www.carolynsshadegardens.com or email atcarolynsshadegardens@verizon.net.

Ed Note: The best places to see the less common snowdrops are in private gardens of HPS/MAG members, such as Carolyn Walker, David Culp, Charles Cresson, Queenie Northrup, Marcia Spoor, Barbara Tiffany, and others.

The photos in this article are courtesy of Carolyn Walker. Clip art from FreeClipartNow.com. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.

Bank to Bend: Alan Street of Avon Bulbs Winterthur Museum, Garden, & Library

Saturday
March 9
11:00 A.M.–noon

Lecture admission also includes tours of March Bank and access to snowdrop and other specialty nurseries.



\$20 (\$10 members)
Call 302.888.4600 to register
www.winterthur.org