

Snowdrops for beginners

Clive Lane

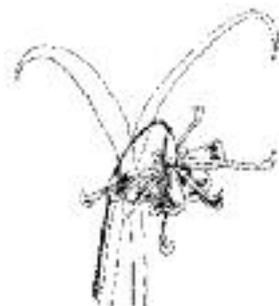
One of the first harbingers of spring are the snowdrops. Even the smallest of gardens will have clusters of them grouped around the trunks of trees or planted as edging to a path. Snowdrops seem to come up overnight; green spears pushing their way upwards through the earth one minute, and flowering on all sides in the February sunshine, the next.

Galanthus elwesii, known as the giant snowdrop, has a larger flower than the common snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis*, and is one of the earliest to bloom.

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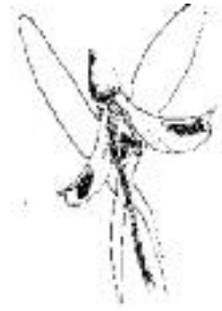
The inner petals of the flowers are marked heavily with green at the base and have a honied fragrance. It has broad, glaucous leaves and is usually in flower several weeks before the little *G. nivalis*. It is the tips of the outer petals of the lovely double *G. nivalis* ‘Green Tip’ which are marked with green and so are the outer petals of the single snowdrop *G. nivalis viridapicis*, which grows to 8 -10 inches.

The double, yellow *G. nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* ‘Lady Elphinstone’ takes time to establish and the yellowing does seem to vary from flower to flower. At its best, the centre of the flower appears to be filled with poorly whisked scrambled egg. At other times, it may be flecked or even wholly green. This variation, though, is random and reversible.



Many snowdrops came to England from men serving in the Crimean War, and take their names from the gardens of recipients. *G. plicatus* ‘Warham’ being one, with dainty rounded

flowers and deep apple-green leaves and a silver central stripe. *Galanthus* 'Magnet' is a very old cultivar with long, slender pedicels on which hang rather heavy flowers that gently move in the wind. *Galanthus nivalis* 'Tiny' is one of the smallest snowdrops with very narrow, grey-green leaves, growing 2 inches tall.



There are many species and hundreds of named varieties of snowdrops to choose from, and it is comparatively easy to build up a wide collection to extend the flowering season. When one form fades away there will be another to take its place. Serious collectors of snowdrops are known as galanthophiles. During February each year collectors of snowdrops hold open days for fellow collectors to come and 'droom' over the flowers. Come rain, snow or shine, galanthophiles will travel long distances to kneel down to scrutinize the minutest differences in each species or variety, falling over themselves to acquire the latest 'finds' on the plant stalls, at whatever the cost.

Despite their hardiness, snowdrops often show a marked preference or distaste for certain localities, even though there may be little variation in soil or altitude. In some areas snowdrops will grow and spread like wildfire but in others, with apparently identical conditions, they refuse to do anything. They are a promiscuous lot: bring them together and when left to their own devices they produce some surprising offspring!

Snowdrops are best transplanted 'in the green' while still in growth. Bulbs should be lifted and divided once the leaves have turned yellow, before late summer when new roots are forming. Never allow the bulbs to dry out, as this puts them under stress and can greatly affect the flower bud deep inside the bulb. Bubs sold in garden centres during the autumn should be avoided, as they rarely make good flowers until they have been in the ground for several years.

Clive gardens in Cheshire and is The CGS Administrator. Tempted? Why not join our snowdrop group? See p51 for details.