

Circling seasons *Pat Collison*

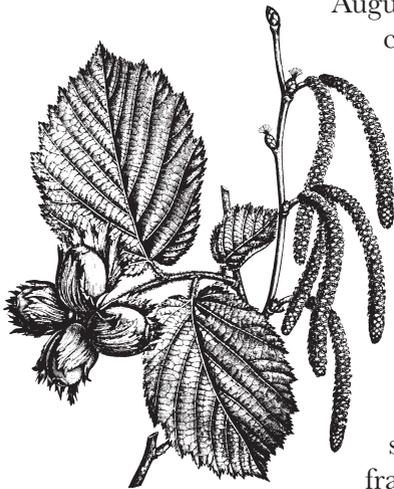
An annual milestone I am always glad to pass is December 21st, the winter solstice and the shortest day. Not that one can notice any real lengthening of daylight hours, it is just the knowledge that the year has turned and spring is on its way back. Nature has been assuring us for several weeks with a hint here and there, but we are usually too busy admiring the late autumn colours of foliage and fruit to notice the grey green bumps along the hazel twigs that gradually lengthen into stiff little fingers, and by February will become the familiar lambs tail catkins that dust the woods and hedgerows with sunshine.

By November, tiny pale green buds the size of match heads were just visible in the leaf axils of wild cherry and apple, while in the garden clusters of scented pink flowers were decorating the twigs of *Viburnum bodnantense* 'Dawn'. Though classed as a winter flowering shrub it generally has a few buds and flowers as early as July and as late as April - I don't recall any winter lasting as long as that! Another winter flowering shrub, *Mahonia japonica* 'Hiemalis' ('Hivernant') also extends

its season both ways and can be in bloom from August until April. For those of us who are concerned about the declining bumble bee population this mahonia is a delight.

Except in bitterly cold weather there are always a few large, slow black and yellow bumble bees fumbling amongst the deliciously fragrant flower sprays. As a result of their activities the shrub usually carries a good crop of berries in summer which are enjoyed by the blackbirds.

There are many plants whose flowers connect winter and spring. Early snowdrops, looking far too dainty and fragile to withstand the icy blasts of January



and February, and exquisite hellebores, single and double flowered, plain or spotted. My favourites are the white flowered varieties with maroon-black spots that obligingly fill a shady corner beside *Mahonia japonica* 'Hiemalis'. I always feel that nature's most emphatic declaration of the imminent arrival of spring is the sudden explosion of white blossom covering the branches of *Prunus spinosa*, the blackthorn or sloe. The bushes or small trees that form a dense web of black thorny twigs all through December and January suddenly - overnight it seems - erupt into clouds of tiny snow white flowers, while all the surrounding trees and bushes are still winter naked.



A few weeks after the blackthorn has announced spring to the world the Norway maples, *Acer platanoides*, reach the same conclusion in a more restrained but equally beautiful display, bearing countless clusters of small flowers in shades of lemony green to yellow ochre. I have always loved maples, but it is for their foliage that they are grown, and I have to confess that it was not until a main road nearby was widened about forty years ago that I even noticed the maples in flower. Some inspired council planner decided that Norway maples would be ideal added to the usual mix of hawthorn, ash etc. to plant along the several miles of new road verges, and ever since then drivers have been treated to a spectacular display of their lemon, lime and ochre blossoms massed all along the roadside. The ochre-tinted blossom belongs to the purple leaved varieties, while the variegated and green leaved trees carry lemon and lime green flowers. Norway maples are not really suitable for small gardens, but some years ago we 'rescued' a seedling

about five inches tall from a crack in the pavement nearby, and it is now a sturdy young tree some fifteen feet tall, carrying a good flush of ochre yellow flowers in spring, followed by glossy dark maroon foliage.

Down at ground level too we can spot assurances that spring is on its way back. Even before December was underway and despite all the snow that smothered countryside and gardens in the latter half of that month, small purple and yellow heartsease violas peeped out from under fallen leaves of sycamore and hornbeam, and white herb robert (*Geranium robertianum*) flowers speckled the clumps of browned crocosmia foliage. This is not simply due to my negligence in weeding out these wildlings, it is because I welcome their cheerful little faces out of season in the bleak midwinter. They seem to spread the message of continuity even more than the cultivated plants whose scheduled flowering season is late winter to spring.

By February I begin looking for buds of *Anemone nemorosa* (wood anemone) on my daily walk in the woods. In the garden it is *Crocus tommasinianus* that really proclaims spring's arrival, with a carpet of mauve and violet flowers suddenly spread over almost every inch of ground, but only when the sun shines. On cloudy days they remain firmly rolled into slender pencils of silvery mauve. What has happened to all the other crocuses that grew in several areas of the garden I have no idea, but few still remain. They were mainly varieties of *Crocus chrysanthus*, some with yellow and bronze striped petals, others in shades of palest blue and white, orange and yellow. I know the squirrels played a part in their demise, but I also think that maybe the 'toms' are more tolerant of the increasing amount of shade as various trees grow and spread their canopies. Well, you can't have everything!! And at least I can still look forward to the narcissus varieties that never seem to fail to open their cheerful flowers even in the dappled shade. Favourites? The smaller types, especially *N.* 'Jetfire' and *N.* 'Tete-a-tete' that have soldiered on for twenty years or more, along with several varieties of tulips, including *T.* 'Apricot Beauty' and *T.* 'Queen of Night'. Of course when they arrive spring is well under way and I will be looking forward to summer!

