

Star performers *Stella Kingsbury*

The first spring flowers I ever saw were when I was a small child growing up in postwar London, when the flowers would arrive firstly in March for my mother's birthday; and then, three weeks later, for mine. They were picked in the copse next to my great aunt's cottage in West Sussex and she never failed to send them, lovingly wrapped first in wet newspaper, then in dry, and finally in brown wrapping paper tied up with string - delivered courtesy of the postal service in a bygone era.

At first glance the flowers looked so frail and tired, a bit like my great aunt herself, wood anemones, primroses, wild shamrock, violets, celandines and the first few early bluebells. But she had wrapped them so well and kept them damp so that by the time they had all spent a couple of hours in various eggcups and jam jars, filling every windowsill and shelf they would perk up miraculously and there would hardly ever be a casualty.

We were originally a West Sussex farming family but my grandmother had come up to London to go into service and had never gone back. My mother lived in Shepherd's Bush where she met dad. However most of the family remained in Sussex, which meant I was lucky enough to spend weekends and holidays in the deeply wooded area on the Sussex /Surrey border

The common plants I learnt from my mother, and, aged 10, I identified a plant for the first time with the help of a well-worn book from the children's section of the public library. The flower was a magnificent greater periwinkle, not the contrived variegated type for sale in garden centres, but the vigorous wild one that pops up in the most inhospitable weather at all times of the year, flowering when ever it pleases - if any plant has the will to live, greater periwinkle has.

Identifying this was a revelation and the start of a lifelong botanical adventure. Whenever I garden now, and I have had several gardens here in Dorset, I always plant greater periwinkle as a reminder of this beginning.

Another favourite flower, very different in many ways, and one with

which I was not familiar until much later, is the fleeting translucent opium poppy, a plant which is not quite of this world. It is so fragile looking but so tough, and has a slightly eerie air about it. I first saw it on television, immortalised in a Geoff Hamilton programme on cottage gardening. I had never seen the plant before, but I've grown them ever since.



But my favourite of all is the tiny sweet violet of early spring, always one that was included in those precious parcels sent to us in London, and one I always try to establish in my various gardens.

Throughout our married life, we have had several rescue dogs, and when our beloved third dog Jack was very ill, we took him for his final walk nearby just before the dreaded last inevitable trip to the vet. Jack was dying, but he stopped and just sniffed a bed of sweet violets growing by the side of the country lane we were on.

Two weeks later away on holiday, this time without Jack, I was on a lone, sad walk in the countryside and suddenly came across a mass of what must have been thousands of sweet white violets on the brow of the hill. It was if Jack was right there with me as I looked at them. Although we have been back to the same spot year after year since, we have never seen white violets there again. Nowadays, with our fifth rescue dog, April, we go on a favourite early morning walk near home. We now live right in the heart of the countryside, and the sweet violets are in bloom now, it is March, together with the celandine sheltering from the cold winds under a bush, completely at home in their snug corner.

Stella gardens in Dorset, and is the winner of this issue's garden gift token for my favourite article.