

True Grit

March 2020



Snowdrops at Colesbourne Gardens

Galloping Galanthophilia

I know what you are thinking – when you have seen one or two snowdrops you have seen them all. Well I received a few from Ray Cobb a couple of years ago and was delighted at how well they looked in pots. I think I already told you that I then spent big bucks on Madeleine (the snowdrop, that is. Not the lady next door) then Janet won a bulb in a raffle for £1 which I was very grown up about. So I had a green one, a yellow one, and a double and some species. Having seen Philip Diplock's pictures of his G. Diggory, the one with the seersucker petals, I bought a couple on eBay. So what was left? Surely that was an adequate collection for a non-believer. Well I had admired G Sophie North at the shows and read the story of its naming so that was a must have, and surely, a must have for any

member of the Woking Group, is G. Ruby Baker. I remember she wrote an item for the newsletter that listed good local places to see Snowdrops. I must retrieve it and maybe republish it in time for next season.

I searched on-line but couldn't find anyone offering my 'must haves' so we went to the AGS Snowdrop Day. We thought it might be a bit 'nerdy' and we weren't disappointed. The day started with a typically defiant talk from Ian Young where he declared himself not to be a believer and in any case he threw all his labels away when he planted in the garden. Very refreshing. The next talk was about pocoliform snowdrops, aimed at the experts. The last talk by Matt Bishop could only have taken place at a Galanthus gathering. He presented an extremely large spreadsheet that was not readable and explained that each cell represented the combination of the characteristics on the axes. Many of the cells were combinations already exhibited by

existing cultivars but the empty ones represented a challenge to breeders. Bearing in mind that not all the characteristics were especially beautiful or even very distinctive the question, even in a believer's mind, must surely be, 'Why bother'?

I knew I had caught the bug when I found myself inspecting all the plants for sale with my head on one side. Since when was the name more important than the beauty of the plant. Shakespeare would have had something to say about that.. Anyway, I couldn't find Sophie North or Ruby Baker



so I saved quite a bit and bought a daffodil instead. (Bowles Early Sulphur)

Though the lunch was mediocre the company at table was first class. We met several notables from the Snowdrop World and they were all such interesting people.

Next day we called into Ashwood Nurseries to replenish my composting materials. Some years ago much was written about the virtues of Melcourt Potting Bark (Cambark) and since then I've used small quantities for orchids and some ericaceous subjects. Disappointed not to find any I asked the man at the checkout who told me they didn't sell it but it was used in the nursery. The boy was sent to get a bag, and then took my trolley to the car. I think I must look more dilapidated than I feel. What outstanding customer service.

With a slight detour on the return journey we were able to visit Colesbourne Gardens home of



the Elwes family. It was Henry John Elwes who introduced *Galanthus elwesii* from Turkey in 1874 and his great grandson, Henry Elwes and his wife Carolyn who set about restoring the garden after 50 years of benign neglect. There are 11 British champion trees and 33 Gloucestershire champions many of them labelled.

The gardens are known for their fine display of snowdrops. They had a good selection of snowdrops for sale that seemed to be suffering from Dutch Tulip mania. A small tray of junior specimens of a new hybrid, enough to fill a 19cm pot, was for sale for a total price of £3250. When it has been bulked up what will it be worth?



We drove home having had a very enjoyable weekend in spite of our acute cynicism. Could it be we are deluding ourselves, and that we are, in fact, closet galanthophiles.

We have already made plans to attend the Ultimate Snowdrop Sale at Myddelton House Gardens next year. Ok, just my two 'must haves' and then I'll stop.



Juno's from Kew seen at the Species Iris Group Early Spring Show.

Crocus and Cat Litter

You may already be aware that I use clay-based granules extensively to grow a range of alpines in pots, including such subjects as Crocus and Dionysia. It was for this purpose that I took a late summer trip to my local supermarket to buy my yearly supply of Tesco Low Dust Cat Litter only to be told that this product would no longer be available. Fortunately a review of the internet showed me that a similar product is still available in the form of “Sanicat Pink” supplied by the Pets-at-Home stores. It was obvious that I was not the first to make this discovery; the Google search for “Moler Clay” (the type used in the Tesco cat litter) gives little information on its composition or its geology but instead provides a stream of websites for cacti and bonsai growers extolling its virtues.

So it was a few days later I was the proud owner of a 30L bag of Sanicat Pink cat litter. Thirty litres, not because I’m such a large scale grower but because this is the smallest size they supply (if you need just a cup-full that is clearly going to be a problem – you could of course always buy yourself a cat while you are about it).

The product is as you might expect, is pink in colour and clearly the same perfumed lightweight Moler clay used in the Tesco cat litter; that is the same volcanically modified diatomaceous earth mined in Denmark. The main difference is Sanicat’s considerably larger particle size. However



I doubt that will be a problem for most horticultural applications. In fact the Sanicat looks more like that original Moler clay product, Seramis, which has been used successfully by growers for many years.

Although I have found clay granules to be a big help in growing crocus in plastic pots, both in reducing corm rot and in expediting the re-potting process, nothing is perfect and I still find increasing the stock of the spring flowering species generally slower and more uncertain than of the autumn species. I have always assumed that this is due to the shorter period during which the spring species are in leaf, this combined with the tendency for warmer spring temperatures to bring growth to a premature end. It may also be partly my fault for growing under glass for much of the time further hastening dormancy.

This was particularly true in 2018 when early spring felt more like summer. I had in fact weighed and counted the number

Tesco low dust on the left
Sanicat on the right



Species	No. of corms	Wt. of corms (g)	No. of corms	Wt. of corms (g)
	Summer 2018		Summer 2019	
Olivieri	x9	15	x13	9
Biflorus Weldenii	x8	13	x12	17
Chrysanthus	x6	12	x11	9
Imperati	x10	20	x20	23
Flavus	x12	9	x9	6
Vitellinus	x6	9	x8	9
Sieberi	x9	11	x19	15
Bowles white	x2	2	x2	2

of corms in some of the pots at the start of that year and so it was these that I first emptied and re-measured. The results are shown in the table below.

The results I find rather surprising if nothing else because of their extreme variability, particularly considering that most variables such as location, pot size and potting medium are being held constant. Looking at the data it's hard to draw any simple conclusions but overall it is fair to say that for the majority the average corm size had decreased even if the total weight had increased. It may also be safe to say that these represent

clones of different species and their genetic constitution must be an important factor. The result of this small selection may be giving a false picture as on the whole the results of this summer re-pot did not appear particularly unusual.

Some insight into one of the poorest performers (Olivieri) can be seen for the images. In this case the new corms remain firmly attached to the old corm residues. I interpret this as the new corms having not fully utilised all the previous year reserves, resulting in small corms. The idea of growth



stopping prematurely would seem to fit with this. The best result (Sieberi) in contrast showed good sized and well separated corms with no residue from the previous season's growth.

Reflecting on these results I decided it was time to try something different which would mean that all the spring species would stay outside during the growing period, hopefully experiencing a cooler and longer growing season. Considering that the last batch of crocus I planted out in the garden were so expertly and thoroughly removed by the local squirrels this may have its risks. For this I reduced the pot size of some so that all the collection would fit snugly in three terracotta or ceramic troughs situated just outside the greenhouse. The troughs were filled with a mixture of sand and previously used cat litter, allowing the pots to sit on a level well-drained surface. I just hope that the squirrels

will not regard the troughs as fair game. Despite the photo I have in fact done away with my usual plants labels and replaced them with short numbered labels pushed just below the pot surface. My intention is to cover these during the summer and use the space to hold summer flowering pots.

This is primarily a horticultural experiment but also an act of plant control. The new system I hope will keep my 70 odd spring pots all in one place and enforce a kind of discipline.

I have counted and weighed all of the corms this time and next year's data will assess its success or otherwise. I know this system is not likely to suit all the species equally well but if I find the system suits me that may be the deciding factor.

Robert Skipper



Thoughts from Editor

A few conclusions that I have drawn from my experience growing Crocus in pots;

Lack of increase in weight. I attribute this to one or more of the following

1 Growing period cut short by early dormancy

2 Too little water

3 Inappropriate level of nutrients

4 Consistently low light level

5 Difficult species

6 Dehydration during dormancy

No 1 is probably the reason why bulbs mostly do

better in the garden than in pots and pots do better plunged in open frames than in a glass-house. Our maritime climate is not what the bulbs experience in nature. We can have several quite mild sunny days in winter causing wide temperature variation, particularly under glass. Will global warming be 'the last straw'!

No of Bulbs

In nature Iridaceae do not form clumps but appear singly. I think this could be due to propagation being by seed rather than division so why does division occur in cultivation?

Some writers say that division occurs because the bulb is stressed in some way. (Paul Cumbleton has suggested this could well be lack of water) But why does splitting help in the survival of the bulb. One might have expected a large bulb to have greater chemical inertia and therefore better able to survive.

Some Iridaceae, notably *Iris danfordiae*, are said to split if not planted deeply enough. It has been postulated that this is protection in case of being foraged. A deeper pot compared with a shallow one does not seem to prevent splitting. Often bulbs show when they want to be deeper and yet most bulbs that split show no sign of trying to get deeper. The new corm(s) are formed during growth i.e. before dormancy, so does this narrow down the cause?

Could splitting be a strategy for survival when seed is either not set or unlikely to survive. Setting seed and not-splitting seems to correlate with some strong growing species especially autumn growing ones.

It will be interesting to read the next chapter in this experiment.

Early Daffodils



Narcissus fernandesii
awarded a 'First' at
Pershore



In 2013 Terry put some *Narcissus canariensis* seed on the raffle table. It was marked as being from Harry Hayes and was a collection by Hecker in 1976. According to Mike Salmon it is *N. Papyraceus*. The flowers have the texture and colour of tissue paper. It fills the unheated greenhouse in which it grows, with a very heavy perfume.

Woking West Surrey

5 March Jon Evans

The Picos Mountains 2

2 April AGM and

Group Flower Show

7 May Paul Cumbleton

Alpines of the Wasatch and Ruby Mountains

AGS Shows

7 March Loughborough

21 March South West

28 March Kent Show

18 April Midlands Show

2 May East Anglia

16 May Wimborne Show

Kent Groups

22 March Adventures with Bulbs

National Auricula and Primula Society

Old Barn Hall, Great Bookham

14 March Early Primula Show

4 April Primula Show

2 May Auricula Show

RHS Wisley Gardens

24-25 March Early Daffodil Competition

7-8 April Daffodil Show

East Surrey

3 March Tom Freeth

Denver Botanical Gardens and Rocky Mountains

7 April Caroline Seymour

Flowers from the avenue of Volcanoes (AGS expedition to Ecuador)

5 May Dan Ryan

Gatton Park

2 June Timothy Walker

What have plants ever done for us?

Garden Party

at the McDaniels, date to be announced

Iris Society

25 April Late Spring Show Wisley

6 June Summer Show

Southern African Bulb Group

29 March. Spring Meeting at new venue, Hale Institute Village Hall (near Farnham)

Plant Heritage

12 March Steve Bustin

'Ghosts, Guns and Guerrilla Gardening'

Life and times of Ellen Wilmot. Visitors £4
St Andrews Church Hall, Cobham.

Narcissus 'Dinah Rose', named for Dinah Rose Batterham by Jim and Jenny Archibald in 2007. The seed was from an open pollinated *N. triandrus* concolor. The stems carry two flowers with 'big ears'.

