

Tale from the Garden!

Up the garden path!

If you're like me & have a dog to walk every day, or you've been taking your daily exercise by taking a little stroll round Stokesley, you'll have noticed how muddy & waterlogged the pathways have become. When the weather is bad & the ground beneath your feet is as soggy as your morning Weetabix, you quickly discover the most traversed routes across the fields, lawns, verges & grassy areas! In summer they are less noticeable, because the grass grows rapidly even when you walk over it with increasing regularity, but in winter, with grass-growth at a standstill, it's not long before the greensward turns to mud as more & more feet trample over the same path. But alongside the 'yuk' & the 'squelch', it's lovely to see little green shoots beginning to pop through. Our gardens & green spaces are becoming a springtime dream – from February onwards, there are carpets of snowdrops appearing & these are followed by more flowering bulbs such as crocus & daffodils.

For welcome assurance that the brighter days of spring are on their way, look no further than snowdrops (*Galanthus*). They are surprisingly varied in height, flower size, shape and even colouring. Given a moist soil they will multiply into drifts and provide plenty of plants to share with fellow gardeners.

Snowdrops are tough, reliable plants, generally flowering in the height of winter, often poking their heads above overlying blankets of snow. They are a cheerful sight in the garden, flowering when little else will, marking the height of winter and that the beginning of spring is not far behind.

The graceful, white nodding snowdrop flowers usually have distinctive green markings. These vary from variety to variety, many are multi-petalled and there are probably more different types than you think. Some gardeners become so fanatical about building up collections of all the different ones that they have been christened with the name 'Galanthophile' – snowdrop lover!



The snowdrop is a perennial which is part of the amaryllis family. The small plant reaches a maximum height of 3 to 6 inches. It is the first of the spring flowers to bloom generally before or coinciding with the vernal equinox at the end of March. Snowdrops produce one small white flower which droops its head toward the ground. When the flower opens it has three inner petals that are covered by three outer petals. The head of the flower will collapse in freezing temperatures and reopen when the weather gets warmer.

The leaves of snowdrops are bluish-green and long and slender, much like blades of grass. They emerge from the bulb enclosed in a sheath. The position of the leaves to each other as they come out is based on the species of plant. The leaves may appear pressed against each other, or pressed against each other with the edges curled out, or one leaf is tightly rolled around the other. At one time this feature of the leaves was used to differentiate between the species but it proved to be unreliable and is no longer used.

Originally believed to be a wildflower native to Britain, the snowdrop is actually native to Europe and the Middle East. It was brought to Britain by the Romans. It is a small genus of about 20 species of plants in the Amaryllidaceae family. They have been known by other names in early history. However, it was Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, who named the snowdrop the *Galanthus nivalis*, "milk flower of the snow," in 1753. It has been introduced into other areas outside of Europe and the Middle East where it has naturalized.

The snowdrop flower has enjoyed a rich and varied history that includes several legends about how the flower came to be.

Garden of Eden: According to legend, Eve was distraught after God cast her out of the Garden of Eden. God sent forth continuous snow and the earth was cold and barren. As Eve sat weeping, an angel appeared to comfort her. The angel caught a snowflake and breathed upon it. The snowflake fluttered to the earth and gave birth to the snowdrop. This delicate bloom came to symbolize hope and rebirth.

German Legend: When God created snow, he gave it the task of visiting the flowers of the earth to gather colours. All the flowers refused, until the snow visited the gentle snowdrop. Seeing that the snowdrop was a kind and generous soul, the snow decided to make a deal. In exchange for her colour, the snow agreed to allow the snowdrop to bloom first every spring. The delicate snowdrop agreed and cheerfully blooms amid the snow each spring. Snow and snowdrops exist side-by-side as friends.

Moldovan Legend: According to Moldovan legend, a fight between the Winter Witch and Lady Spring gave birth to the snowdrop. One year, the Winter Witch decided that she would not give up her reign of the earth when Lady Spring arrived. During the ensuing battle, Lady Spring pricked her finger and a drop of her blood fell to the earth. The blood drop melted the snow and up sprung a tiny snowdrop, a sign that Lady Spring had won the battle with the Winter Witch.

Romanian Legend: According to this legend, each year the sun took on the form of a young girl as it returned to warm the land in the spring. One year, Winter refused to let go of his stronghold on the earth and took the young girl hostage. A Hero soon appeared to rescue his love from the grips of winter. A battle ensued, and the girl was set free, but not before Hero was wounded. As the sun began to rise into the sky, Hero fell to the ground and drops of his blood stained the earth. Tiny snowdrops burst forth in celebration of the return of spring. Romanians continue to honour the snowdrop as a symbol of the return of spring.

Victorian Customs: Not all cultures view the snowdrop as a symbol of hope and rebirth. For the Victorians, the snowdrop represented death and even considered it bad luck to bring snowdrops inside the home. The sight of a single snowdrop bloom was considered an omen of death. One of the reasons it was considered back luck is because it was found in many cemeteries and around gravesites. It has evolved to symbolize sympathy and consolation.

United States: The snowdrop shares its symbolism with the carnation, as they are both the birth flower for the month of January.

Snowdrops are one of the few flowers that only come in one colour – white. This is probably why the snowdrop symbolizes purity, the traditional colour meaning of white flowers.

Meaningful Botanical Characteristics of the Snowdrop Flower:

Medicinal: Galanthamine, an alkaloid found in the snowdrop flower, is currently approved for the treatment of Alzheimer's in several countries. It may be effective in treating diseases of the nervous system and is being studied for its effectiveness in treating HIV.

Religious: The snowdrop flower is also used in religious ceremonies. In the 15th Century, monks planted snowdrops in the monastery gardens. During the Candlemas (Feb. 2), the picture of Virgin Mary was removed and snowdrop petals were displayed instead.

Ornamental: Snowdrops are used as ornamental plantings, potted plants or cut flowers.

The tiny snowdrop holds so much meaning and beauty, a garden just is not complete without them. They herald the beginning of spring with purity and innocence. Cut and put in a bud vase, they bring an elegant simplicity to any home. They are the perfect gift when you want to offer sympathy and condolence.

The snowdrop flower's message is typically positive, signifying hope, rebirth and a bright future.

So when you've come home after trudging through the mud, remember the pretty little snowdrop & take heart!

Deep sleeps the Winter,

Cold, wet and grey;

Surely all the world is dead;

Spring is far away.

Wait! The world shall waken;

It is not dead, for lo,

The Fair Maids of February

Stand in the snow!

Cicely Mary Barker 'The Snowdrop Fairy' (1895-1973) – English Illustrator and Author