



BULB LOG 09 .....4<sup>th</sup> March 2009

**Robin Red Breast**

Having spent the last few weeks looking at the bulbs under glasshouse conditions I thought I would look at some of the many that are now appearing in the garden.

The weather is still on the cool side but we have had a few days when the sunshine was strong enough to raise the temperature into double figures reaching as far as 11 degrees centigrade.

I never cease to be amazed at how quickly the early spring bulbs can react to these mild conditions even though I understand that is precisely what they have evolved to do.

As I wander round looking, pulling out the odd weed that I find and taking pictures I am accompanied by this wee friend with the red breast – hoping that I disturb a grub to eat.



**Spring Bulbs in Trough**

We bought this trough at a closing down sale of a garden centre about thirty years ago even though I was making our own we could not resist the bargain of three of these at a give away price. It sits below our sitting room window facing south and over the years has had all sorts of bulbs poked into it both autumn and spring flowering. There are no rarities in this wonderful cheery display these are common Crocus and Iris cultivars enjoying the sunshine.



***Iris histrioides* 'Major'**

In the fore ground is *Iris histrioides* 'Major' a plant that I remember used to be very common when I first got interested in bulbs but then it almost disappeared. I suspect that the common disease problems of fungal rots and virus infections faced by many of the reticulate Irises were the cause of the sudden shortage but luckily it has kept going in some collections and is now making a welcome comeback. I also got the two clumps in the background as *Iris histrioides* 'Major' but I think they are possibly *Iris histrioides* 'Lady Beatrice Stanley'. I intend to split all three clumps and replant them as individual bulbs just as the leaves start to go yellow in a few months time.



***Iris Katharine Hodgkin***



### **Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' flowers**

Despite their delicate appearance Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' flowers are as tough as old boots surviving almost anything that our weather can throw at them. They increase quickly with each well grown bulb not only doubling itself each year but also by the large quantities of rice grain sized offsets that appear at the base of the bulbs. Again they increase best if they are divided at least every second year and the rice grains grow on much better if they are moved away from the parent bulbs. I also think that after a few years they become so congested that you cannot appreciate the beauty of the individual flowers.



### **Crocus sieberi sublimis 'Tricolor'**

Another of the superb garden plants that was very expensive when it first appeared in cultivation is the beautiful Crocus sieberi sublimis 'Tricolor'. Since its introduction it has become widely available and affordable to the general public for mass plantings but we should not let that distract us from its beauty and desirability. There is a

temptation to only concentrate on the rare and difficult plants but we must resist becoming plant snobs and recognise the beauty in plants even when they become widely available.



### **Crocus gargaricus subsp. herbertii**

I just love the mixture of spring colour with the egg yolk yellow flowers of *Crocus gargaricus* subsp. *herbertii* that runs around by means of stolons.

It is very difficult when digging to find these corms because even the flowering sized ones are among the smallest of all the *Crocus* genus.

From the latest research I understand that this plant is not as closely related to the very similar *Crocus gargaricus* subsp. *gargaricus* as the morphology suggests and it will be renamed as just *Crocus herbertii*.

The genetic work and current phylogenetic study of this genus has mostly confirmed the classification

and our understanding of *Crocus* with just a few surprises like this to fuel our interest. You can also see a nice pink *Hepatica*, *Galanthus* and *Eranthis* adding to the spring colour in the picture.

### **Eranthis cilicicus plant**

The *Eranthis* at the lower centre of the above picture is the species from the east *Eranthis cilicicus* which occurs in Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan.

It generally has larger darker yellow flowers and more finely divided leaves than *E. hyemalis*. I also find it opens its flowers at lower temperatures than does its close relative.



### **Eranthis cilicicus**

Opening your flowers like this may be a good move in Turkey but it is not always the best idea in North East Scotland as they can fill with water.



**Eranthis cilicicus**

I do find them not so easy to establish in our garden and I suspect they are not as hardy as the more familiar Eranthis hyemalis.



**Eranthis hyemalis**

Eranthis hyemalis is the much more familiar Winter Aconite that we see commonly in our gardens. It is another of these successful plants that is widely and cheaply available but we should not think any the less of it for that in fact that makes in many ways a much better plant than a rarity that is difficult to get and even more difficult to grow. If you are observing the picture carefully you will have noticed that the sunshine has also brought out the first of the insect pollinators that I have seen this year.

The hover flies are not just attracted to the bright yellow beacon shining brightly in the sunlight but also to the delightful scent of pure honey that the aconites have. If you have never got down on your knees to smell one you should - or pick a flower and raise it up to your nose to enjoy the other great pleasure these spring flowers bring to us.



### **Eranthis hyemalis - Guinea Gold – cilicicus**

When you bring these two great species together you get hybrids – the Eranthis Tubergenii group – the most famous of which is Eranthis ‘Guinea Gold’ seen in the centre between its parents hyemalis left and cilicicus right.



### **Eranthis ‘Guinea Gold’**

One of my troughs of Eranthis ‘Guinea Gold’ that I can replant and divide each year and so speed up the rather slow rate of increase of this fabulous plant. This plant also grows extremely well in the open garden where it will increase by division but, being a sterile hybrid, it does not set seed. I have been told that there are some fertile hybrids in the Tubergenii group and I have been busy transferring the pollen both ways between E.cilicicus and E. hyemalis in an attempt to get our own crosses.



## **Galanthus plicatus**

I should mention that other great bulb the Galanthus, which we do have a lot of around our garden. Increasingly more and more varieties seem to be arriving each with its own name label many of which are difficult to tell apart.

This one does not have a name (yet) it is one of the Brechin Castle ones and is either a selection of or a hybrid of *G.plicatus*. I like it for its substantial flowers and broad dull green leaves.

So many Galanthus have been recently named that it is difficult to keep up but I don't think it is altogether a

bad thing. I see it as a field trial on a massive scale with hundreds of named plants being grown in hundreds of gardens.



## **Galanthus 'S. Arnott'**

In twenty years time the results will be that some of the best new names will still be around and doing well along with some of the tried and tested old cultivars like 'S. Arnott'. The rest of the named forms will merge or dwindle and will be confined to the books and a few specialist collections.



**Leucojum vernum**

With so much enthusiasm for the Snowdrop please do not forget the equally beautiful – if not more so – Snow Flake, *Leucojum vernum*.



**Leucojum vernum  
'Podpolozje'**

With only one species involved we are never going to see the variation there is in the *Galanthus* hybrids and forms but there are some around worth seeking out.

*Leucojum vernum* 'Podpolozje' is a form of *L. Vernum* var *carpathicum* introduced by Janis Ruksans which has the yellow tips and generally twin flowers.





**Leucojum vernum var carpathicum  
with yellow ovary**

Right is a seedling of the carpathicum variety that has yellow ovaries, I have a number of them now and they are increasing well.

## **Leucojum vernum var carpathicum**

This variety is separated out because of the yellow tips to the floral segments.

This feature is not stable as some years the tips can be quite green while other years they are yellow. I have even seen yellow and green tips on the same flower.



## **Leucojum vernum var vagneri**

The form with robust leaves and generally twin flowers is var vagneri.

It is only when they are growing well that it has twin flowers on every stem.

As with all bulbs these clumps are best split every three to five years.



## **Leucojum vernum var vagneri**

When I do split them up I tend to spread them around the beds planting the bulbs individually. My long term aim is to have the lovely effect of a mixture of spring bulbs echoed in every bed in the garden.



It is also worth tipping a flower over to see the beauty within. You can see the delicate veins and shaping of the flower more clearly from the inside and then when you look at it again from the outside you can appreciate the flowers even more.



## **Spring Delights**

It is such a great time of year with all the early plants waking from their winter rest and everywhere I look there are spring delights.