



Leucojum aestivum
'Gravetye Giant'

Often mistaken for a giant snowdrop, *Leucojum aestivum* has three to four nodding white bells hanging from the tip of each 60cm stem. A little green spot adorns the end of each petal that looks like a drip about to fall. Unlike demure snowdrops, these are big and bold, visible from across the garden in March and April, a month or more after the snowdrops have faded. They like heavy soil and will withstand occasional flooding. The clump increases in size year on year and can be divided as the leaves die back. AGM*.

Height/spread 60cm x 10-15cm (in flower)
60cm x 30 cm (in summer).

Origins Europe.

Conditions Damp sun.

Hardiness rating RHS H7¹.

Season March – April.



Derry Watkins is the owner of Special Plants nursery near Bath

March plants

Derry Watkins chooses a selection of her favourite flowers and foliage to introduce some much needed colour into early spring gardens

WORDS DERRY WATKINS PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM



Pulmonaria 'Blue Ensign'

Pulmonarias are work horses in the garden, thriving where other plants struggle. Cut the leaves hard back after flowering to get fresh, unblemished growth. Most pulmonarias have spotted leaves, some have silver, but this plain Jane has only plain green leaves. It's when in flower that she becomes the belle of the ball. The brightest most intense gentian blue with none of the muddy purple and pink other pulmonarias offer. Unnoticed for most of the year, in March she steps forward to flaunt her gorgeous blue gown. AGM.

Height/spread 30cm x 30cm.

Origins Europe.

Conditions Shade, not too dry.

Hardiness rating RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

Season March – April.



Corylopsis pauciflora

I have very few shrubs. They take up too much space and look dull for too much of the year. I make an exception for *Corylopsis*. Dainty, pale, sulphur-yellow flowers dangle from leafless branches, exquisite when covered in rain. The scent reminds me of its cousin witch hazel, which won't grow for me. After the flowers, come small, neat leaves, flushed red when young then turning yellow in autumn. The spreading branches are attractive even in winter. An understated and elegant addition to any garden.

Height/spread 1.2m x 2.2m.

Origins Japan or Taiwan.

Conditions Sun or light shade, prefers acid soil, but tolerates my alkaline clay.

Hardiness rating RHS H5, USDA 6a-8b.

Season Early spring.



Thalictrum 'Elin'

Young foliage is purple, which slowly unfurls to blue-grey flushed with purple, and it is as good as any flower in March. And then it begins to grow, and grow, and grow. Two and half metres tall by June, it flowers way over my head with delicate powder puffs of pink and cream. The tall seedheads and blue-green, aquilegia-like leaves make a semi-transparent screen for the rest of the summer. The sturdy stems will stand unsupported till early winter. It is a sterile hybrid so no seedlings, but each plant slowly fattens up. Old plants can be divided in early spring.

Height/spread 2.5m x 2.5m.

Origins Bred by Coen Jansen.

Conditions Sun, not too dry.

Hardiness rating RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.

Season March – November.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. ¹Hardiness ratings given where available



Lunaria annua 'Corfu Blue'
Lunaria annua, or honesty, is biennial. You sow it one year and it blooms the next. The lunaria seed I got from Corfu bloomed with other lunarias, and were a particularly nice blue-purple so I saved their seed. When I went to pull up the apparently dead plants they were beginning to sprout again. The next year those original plants bloomed a month earlier. So although it looks just like *Lunaria annua*, it is not exactly biennial. Some plants live for a few years and bloom at odd times, occasionally July or even October. *Lunaria annua* seems to have morphed into *Lunaria semiperenne*.

Height/spread 60cm x 80cm.
Origins Ionian islands.
Conditions Sun or shade.
Hardiness rating RHS H7.
Season Early spring, and other odd times.



Coronilla valentina subsp. *glauca* 'Citrina'
 The best type of *Coronilla* (named for its crown of pea-like flowers at the tip of each stem) is *Coronilla valentina* subsp. *glauca* 'Citrina' with blue-grey (glauca) leaves and pale, lemon-yellow (citrina) flowers. The fragrant flowers appear off and on all year, most heavily in the spring, but what I adore are the winter flowers begging to be cut. Cutting the longest stems improves the plant, keeping it a tidy, blue-green mound. Give it a sunny, sheltered site with good drainage to get as many of those winter flowers as possible.

Height/spread 60-90cm x 60-90cm.
Origins Mediterranean.
Conditions Full sun, good drainage.
Hardiness rating RHS H4.
Season Winter and spring.

Cardamine quinquefolia
 When the rest of the garden is sheltering below ground, *Cardamine quinquefolia* pops up, first its bright-green leaves in February, then clusters of dainty mauve-pink flowers in March. It makes a carpet of pink against a north-facing wall under an evergreen climber. Not an easy place but she has made it her own, every year covering another few inches. For two weeks the prettiest pink flowers bob about. Then she goes to bed again, disappearing below ground until next March. Unlike some other cardamines, has never self-seeded for me.

Height/spread 20cm x 20cm.
Origins Europe.
Conditions Shade, better if damp, but tolerant of dry.
Hardiness rating RHS H7.
Season Early spring.



Viola corsica
 The prince of violas. Blooming from March through October in shades of purple, it is a hardy perennial that self-seeds. I planted it in the half sun that I thought a viola might like to grow. It survived a few years there and then gently began to self-seed around the corner. It has now abandoned the light shade and colonised 25 metres of my hottest driest border. I should have guessed the conditions it would like best from its name. You would not think a Corsican plant could be so happy here. It is a river of purple for eight months, untouched by me.

Height/spread 30cm x 30cm.
Origins Mountains of Corsica.
Conditions Full sun or half-day sun.
Hardiness rating USDA 4a-9b.
Season Early spring though autumn.



Anemone x lipsiensis
 Looking just like pale-yellow wood anemones, a patch of *Anemone x lipsiensis* lights up the ground as if someone has spilled sunlight. The fine leaves are pretty enough to merit closer inspection. When the flowers fade, the leaves quickly follow suit and the whole plant disappears for another year. Like many woodland plants, it is summer dormant. The stick-like corms spread underground giving a slightly bigger patch of gold every year. If you can, find the corms in late summer, you can divide and replant them to extend the colony.

Height/spread 10-15cm x 10-15cm.
Origins *Anemone ranunculoides* x *Anemone nemorosa*.
Conditions Shade, humus-rich soil.
Hardiness rating RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.
Season Early spring.



Hacquetia epipactis
 Extraordinary tight little mounds of bright, lime-green flowers push through the dead leaves in late winter. What look like the green flowers are really bracts, and what look like the yellow stamens in the centre of each flower are really the tiny flowers packed together. Bizarrely, this is an umbel, cousin to carrots and cow parsley. Altogether a master of disguise and deceit. The bracts become more and more vivid, almost luminous, as the tiny flowers open, then gradually fade when the seed has set. AGM.

Height/spread 12cm x 12cm (in flower); 30cm x 30cm (in summer leaf).
Origins Europe.
Conditions Good soil in light shade.
Hardiness rating RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.
Season Early spring.



Places to visit

Derry shares some of her favourite places to see plants at their best.

Cotehele, near Saltash, Cornwall, has a collection of 30,000 daffodils made up of nearly 300 varieties, some of them 200 years old. The slopes of the River Tamar used to provide early daffodils for the whole country in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Remnant populations of vanished varieties are scattered through the lanes and in abandoned fields, and have



Cotehele

been collected at Cotehele. The older varieties tend to be pale and slender, many developed from the native *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*. In late March the head gardener offers guided daffodil walks, and the visitor centre is collecting memorabilia, photographs and recordings of the people who worked the daffodil fields. The snowdrops, and blossom in the apple and

cherry orchards, are also fantastic. St Dominick, near Saltash, Cornwall PL12 6TA. Tel 01579 351346. nationaltrust.org.uk/cotehele

Westbury Court, Gloucestershire, has the last remaining Dutch-style water garden in Britain. Dating from the 18th century, it is very simple and serene. Evergreen hedges, topiary and perfectly straight canals of still water

calm the soul. All the plants, even those in the vegetable garden, are 18th-century varieties to tie in with the water garden. Small but perfectly formed. Westbury-on-Severn, Gloucestershire GL14 1PD. Tel 01452 760461. nationaltrust.org.uk/westbury-court-garden
Avondale Nursery, near Coventry, holds the national collection of wood anemones, one of my



Westbury Court

favourite spring flowers. Delicate, fleeting, named for the Anemoi, the Greek gods of wind, they come and they go, carpeting woods in early spring. Many beautiful forms have been selected: blue, pink or white flowers, double flowers – even all green flowers. Avondale Nursery at Russell's Garden Centre, Mill Hill, Baginton, Warwickshire CV8 3AG. Tel 024 7667 3662. avondalenursery.co.uk