



(Left) *Galanthus plicatus* Colossus, a robust, handsome snowdrop with particularly showy foliage. It sometimes flowers on Christmas Day at Cambo, and can be relied on to flower in Scotland in January

Not that you need to be in the grip of collecting mania to enjoy visiting Cambo during the snowdrop season. The woods of the estate are carpeted in late February with sheets of their white flowers in countless thousands. To wander at that time beside the Cambo Burn is an unforgettable experience for anyone with even the mildest interest in plants.

The efforts of Mr Erskine's grandmother, Magdalene, from the 1920s to the 1940s were largely responsible for these spectacular expanses. Not only did she spread snowdrops herself, but year after year her eight children were all sent out to split and replant the clumps. 'They were once caught tipping large quantities into a hole,' Mrs Erskine says, 'and were sent back to do the job decently.' >



There were also sadder reasons, emotional rather than aesthetic, for some of that early attention. 'We arrived back here in December and by mid January, following a family tragedy, we were running the estate. I remember looking for early snowdrops and aconites for a wreath, and my mother-in-law pointing out the clumps that regularly bloomed first. Quite soon, the woods were transformed, and gave me hope.' That sort of hope-giving transformation has always been at the heart of the attraction of the wild snowdrop, its fragile yet resolute white blooms promising the return of life after the dark days of winter.

Mrs Erskine began by selling 'ordinary' snowdrops, together with snowflakes and aconites, to earn a little money to help with the upkeep of the walled garden, 'which was a great drain on our resources'. When there was any surplus cash, it went on plants. 'Early on, I bought a few of Helen Ballard's wonderful hellebores and one or two of Philip Ballard's special snowdrops. They were very expensive and I remember tussling with my conscience, trying to convince myself that they were an investment, not an extravagance.' From such modest beginnings, full-blown addiction slowly grew. 'I was already examining all our double snowdrops, enjoying the variations in the flowers, so I didn't really need much encouragement.' Before long, she was exploring the specialist nurseries, looking for specialist books and papers, and visiting her first galanthus gala.

Not that she is the sort of collector who has to have an example of everything, attractive or not. 'I like to think I can turn my back on at least some of the

The Cambo Burn, which rushes through woodland to the seashore and the recently restored Kingsbarns Golf Links

Most of the snowdrops in the Cambo woods are double-flowered, with patches of singles here and there. 'True doubles don't set seed, of course, but the single-doubles—the less tidy doubles—do seem to self-sow,' Mrs Erskine says.

A keen gardener since childhood, she has always been particularly interested in 'the unusual, the minute, the detailed'. So, when she and her husband returned to Cambo from South America, where they had been running a hotel on an island off the coast of Brazil, its amazing snowdrops soon caught her eye. 'I remember my attention being attracted very early by the one patch we had of a tall, single, Atkinsii-type snowdrop, given to my mother-in-law by a neighbour.'

FAVOURITES AND FUSSERS

Catherine Erskine's choice of favourite snowdrops, and some fussers which she calls 'miffy brutes'.

'Snowdrops are best planted after flowering. The most important thing is not to let the bulbs dry out. When planting special snowdrops, it is a good idea to add a handful of coarse sand to help prevent disease.

'Snowdrop clumps benefit from being split every few years. This discourages disease and can help flowering. Slow increasers can sometimes be made more enthusiastic by being moved to another site.'

FAVOURITES

Magnet 'I love the simplicity and perfection of shape of its individual flowers—large, single, with rounded ends to their petals. This is my "desert island snowdrop".'

G. plicatus subsp byzantinus 'A sturdy snowdrop with real presence. The inner segments of the flowers have an attractive green mark at the apex and base.'

Augustus 'Named for E. A. Bowles, this form has a pleasing balance between the short, broad leaves and the neat, chubby flowers.'



(Above) *Galanthus Hippolyta*, one of the shorter *Greatorex* doubles. Its flowers have concave outer petals. (Below) Snowdrops and aconites for sale in the walled garden



its individual flowers—large, single, with rounded ends to their petals. And after a hundred years it is still healthy, vigorous and easy to grow. It was the first special snowdrop I bought and it is still my “desert island snowdrop”.

The gardens at *Cambo House, Kingsbarns, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8QD* (01333 450054; www.camboestate.com), are open throughout the year, from 10am to dusk. The snowdrops are at their best from the end of the first week in February to the end of the first week in March.

Snowdrops, snowflakes and aconites are on sale in the garden. *Cambo* snowdrops are usually despatched by mail order, in the green, during late February and March. There is an extensive list of specialist snowdrops, which are available in small quantities (send a stamped, addressed envelope for the current list to the *Cambo Estate Office* at the address above).

Photographs: Val Corbett.

(Below) *Galanthus nivalis* *Walrus*, which is named for its long, linear, tusk-like outer segments



John Gray ‘An early-flowering hybrid with large, single flowers with a dark green sinus mark, which fades towards the apex into a bottle-green cross on the inner petals.’

Sophie North ‘This chunky, small *plicatus* was found in Dunblane and named for one of the victims of the Dunblane massacre.’

Mighty Atom ‘I think I have the true *Mighty Atom*, but so does everyone else. It hardly matters who is right, as snowdrops distributed under this name are reliably fine.’

Cordelia ‘A long-flowering, tidy double, with a dark green sinus mark.’

FUSSERS

Sandersii ‘This doesn’t seem to like it here. Still, I love it, and persevere.’

Trym ‘Its flowers appear to have no outer segments. It is said to increase rapidly when happy—but I can’t make it happy.’

Icicle ‘A beautiful, late-flowering snowdrop which is neither easy, nor quick. Last year, after several years, it produced two flowers.’

Three Ships ‘It flowers round Christmas Day, which is rare for a *plicatus* form, but increases here at a painfully slow rate.’



SEE A SNOWDROP SPECTACULAR

In February and early March, the woods at Cambo, near St Andrews, in Fife, glimmer with snowdrops.

In the gardens, many rare and special forms are nurtured. TIM LONGVILLE reports.

Constellations of snowdrops and aconites in the woods at Cambo. They were mostly introduced and spread by Magdalene Erskine and her eight children from the 1920s until the 1940s

MOST of the famous snowdrop gardens are to be found in parts of England where the climate is most favourable and the season consequently early. However, there is at least one considerable snowdrop garden and nursery in the harsher climate of eastern Scotland. It is at Cambo House, near St Andrews, whose summer gardens were featured in *COUNTRY LIFE* last year (May 15, 2003).

Peter and Catherine Erskine run the estate at Cambo, and by virtue of their northerly location, and hence relatively late season, they can offer galanthophiles something quite special: the possibility of extending by several weeks the period during which they can satisfy their passion.