



**TO DECORATE  
HER DINING-ROOM TABLE ON  
CHRISTMAS DAY CATHERINE WILL  
SEEK OUT THE EARLY FLOWERING  
'COLOSSUS' OR 'THREE SHIPS'  
VARIETIES.**

Although Catherine says she 'was always a gardener,' she only became seriously involved at Cambo 17 years ago, the year her youngest daughter Mary was born.

This was when she began splitting clumps, replanting the thinnings and selling the mature, flowered bulbs.

'We literally farm the woods,' she explains. 'Over the years we have dug up thousands and thousands of snowdrops to sell and replanted and redistributed the thinnings but it is impossible to tell where we have dug.'

'With all the replanting it means they get better and better every year. The snowdrops must like it here in this light fertile soil as they multiply so rapidly.'

To further demonstrate this point she shows me a triangular bed at the edge of the wood thick with *G. Leucojum vernum*, larger, slightly indented, flowers.

'I have taken literally thousands of snowdrops out of this patch,' she says, 'but they multiply so well that you can't tell.'

Her collection now includes 180 varieties of snowdrops. The most common *Galanthus*, the one we know best, is the single *Galanthus nivalis*. Identifying the other ones requires practice.

'Telling them apart is difficult because the differences are so minute, perhaps down to no more than the size of a flower, the width of leaves, or green markings inside the flower. To decorate her dining-room table on Christmas day Catherine will seek out the early flowering 'Colossus' or 'Three Ships', which once dug up and put in a pot with some moss will make a perfect decoration.

Snowdrops, she suggests, may have become popular because their simple elegant lines suit the current vogue for minimalism. □

### Finding Cambo

Cambo is situated seven miles south of St Andrews on the coastal road at Kingsburn and is open all year round with an honesty box. The garden is well sign posted. The best time to see the snowdrops is for three weeks from the middle of February. It is possible to stay in the house – in some style – and also be photographed in the lovely surroundings.  
[www.camboestate.com](http://www.camboestate.com)  
Telephone: 01335 450313

Above: Snowdrops curtain the path along the burn. Previous page – top right: Carpets of *Galanthus nivalis*, the single snowdrops are brightened with pools of yellow aconites along the driveway to Cambo House.

PHOTOGRAPHS ROY SUMMERS



**T**he current mania for snowdrops,' says Catherine Erskine as we walk through the woodlands at Cambo, sheets of snowdrops on either side of us, 'is almost like the Dutch tulipmania in the 1630s. It is a kind of Galanthus fever.'

Although the prices for snowdrop bulbs have not reached the same heights as the speculative sums that were invested in Holland – many of which were lost when the market collapsed in 1637, Catherine finds it amazing how much people are willing to spend. She has just returned from a snowdrop day in Lincolnshire where dedicated galanthophiles exchanged bulbs and advice. Rare bulbs such as the lovely yellow-marked 'Primrose Warburg' were fetching as much as €25 per bulb.

As we walk across the lawn and into the woods, she pauses to pull some brown beech leaves away from a patch of snowdrops pushing their way towards the sunlight, adding: 'Nowadays people are willing to drive for miles to see snowdrops.'

And many of those people come to Cambo, to see the 70 acres of spectacular snowdrop carpeted woodlands that run alongside the Cambo burn to the East Neuk of Fife. It is a journey that is well worth undertaking; when

# Sally through the Snowdrops

ANTOINETTE GALBRAITH DELIGHTS IN A WINTER WALK  
THROUGH THE CARPETS OF OVER 180 VARIETIES OF  
SNOWDROPS AT CAMBO IN FIFE.



Snowdrops carpet the floor at Cambou. Previous page: Some of the names bear historical associations with the people who bred them, like the Lady Elphinstone, with double flowers and charming yellow markings.



The robust *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott' also known as 'Arnott's Seedling' has large, almond-scented flowers and wide leaves.



## Snowdrop Factfile

Snowdrops are hardy and easy to grow; on most well draining soils they survive almost any weather conditions. They are resistant to the wind and a hard frost merely knocks them back temporarily probably prolonging the growing season.

Catherine explains: 'A cold, frosty winter suits them as the frost slows their growth. Last year January was so mild I was afraid they would soon be over.'

Snowdrops are best lifted and divided when they are 'in the green.' This is after they have finished flowering and before their leaves die back. 'In other words,' Catherine says, 'they are still alive and have not dried out.'

They look their best when they are 'managed.' This means thinning the clumps regularly and allowing the snowdrops to spread out over the entire woodland floor or grassy area. Once you've seen the snowdrops at Cambo you will never want to leave yours alone in their thick clumps again. Don't plant in groups of 2 or 3, Snowdrops don't like to be alone — no-one knows why.



you turn off the coastal road south of St Andrews sheets of snowdrops broken up by pools of yellow aconites welcome you on either side of the mile long drive.

Once you are on foot you can follow the burn as it runs through the walled garden where the magnificent herbaceous borders are well worth another visit in the summer.

The path then leads through the policies down to the shore where it joins up with the coastal path; this path then runs back through the estate woods in a loop. It is a charming walk; the day I visited, the sun which shone through the bare branches of the mature trees, had dried the leaves on the woodland floor to a crisp brown making it easy for the snowdrops to push their way through.

Below the path, the stony sides of the burn are lined with Hart's Tongue Fern and you can see little clumps of snowdrops that have fallen off the side of the hill to take root on pieces of moss-covered rock.

The Neo-Georgian sandstone house at Cambo was built in 1881 on the site of a much older house that was destroyed by fire. Thus the garden and the estate is considerably older than the existing house and has been developed by family members over generations stretching back as far as the 1660s.

'Peter's aunts were educated at home and a lot of time was spent splitting snowdrops and replanting them,' Catherine says.

Her mother-in-law Lady Erskine, who we meet walking in the garden, confirms this, adding that her husband, Sir David, and his brother and sisters were paid 1d for a thousand snowdrops they split during the First World War.