

Spring at Gable House

John and Brenda Foster's garden in Suffolk is home to impressive collections of snowdrops, crocus and other early spring-flowering plants. **Simon Garbutt** walks among the carpets of flowers. Photography by Simon Garbutt



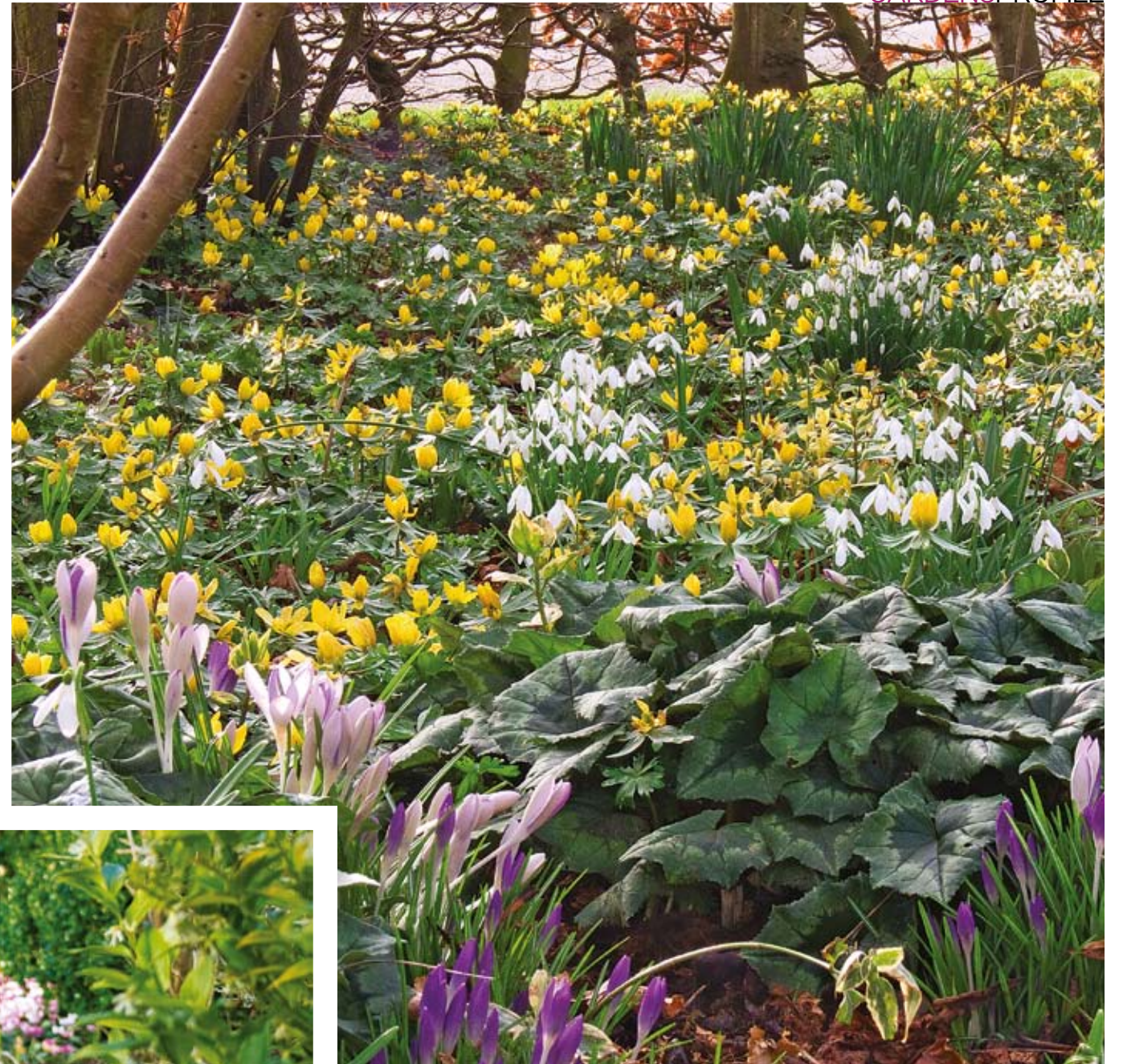
REASONS FOR BUYING a property are many and varied, but for John and Brenda Foster the choice was simple. They wanted somewhere to grow produce for their greengrocery in Beccles, Suffolk. In 1965 they moved to Gable House, Redisham, 5 miles away, largely because of its 4,000sq m (1 acre), south-facing garden. The house was a secondary consideration and John later built a large extension to provide space for their growing family.

Today the beautiful garden is home to an impressive plant collection, in particular around 300 different kinds of snowdrop. Things were rather different when they moved in. The western half of the garden was an old, neglected orchard. 'The trees were 100 years old or so, and in bad shape. We removed them all,' says John. 'But their fallen leaves did wonders for the heavy clay soil: the first potatoes we grew to clear the land were 1.3m (4ft) tall.'

The plot's shape, defined by the road



WINTER'S END The path to John (far left) and Brenda Foster's house passes through plantings of early bulbs (left). *Crocus*, *Cyclamen*, *Eranthis* and myriad snowdrops thrive in the lee of the beech hedge which shelters the garden (right)



HELLEBORE HAVEN As well as bulbous plants, the Fosters have collections of Lenten rose (*Helieborus x hybridus*) which seed freely around the garden (left)

the country. Interest in snowdrops is probably greater now than ever.'

John's own interest began around 1980, when the late Lady Priscilla Bacon, from Raveningham Hall (across the border in Norfolk), brought bunches of 'giant' snowdrops to sell in the shop. 'They were *Galanthus* 'Atkinsii' and G. 'S. Arnott', not unusual now, but were reliable, vigorous, easy-to-grow plants. They started me off,' he says. Now he grows a vast range, including species and cultivars, varying from *G. nivalis* (common snowdrop) to the more

recherché delights of *G. plicatus* 'Trym' and G. 'South Hayes', both with striking, bold green markings on all six 'petals'.

Matching needs

Some of his snowdrops grow in drifts, others in small clumps, mostly under deciduous shrubs, though a few prefer bone-dry soil below fastigate conifers. Autumn-flowering *G. reginae-olgae* is one such; more surprisingly, dainty but vigorous 'Ray Cobb', with its bright yellow ovary and inner markings, also relishes these conditions. This cultivar ▶

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was selected by John from some bulbs of *G. nivalis* Sandersii Group.

Most other *G. nivalis* cultivars do better under the trees on the north side of the garden, where the shade is deep and dry in summer, dappled and moist in winter. By contrast, John finds grey-leaved *G. elwesii* hybrids and cultivars like an open, sunny, well-drained spot; *G. plicatus* and its hybrids lie somewhere in between. ‘But *Galanthus platyphyllus* and the Russian species are snow-melt plants, so they need quite wet soil.’

Building up stocks

His latest acquisitions, bought at great expense or swapped with other enthusiasts, are tended with care. ‘I plant new bulbs individually in long pots, in John Innes No.2 compost mixed 50:50 with peat – opened with a liberal dose of sharp sand or grit,’ John says. ‘They’re isolated in the cold greenhouse for two or three years, to check for disease and to double them up, so that I have one bulb to grow and another to chip.’

‘Chipping’ (see: www.rhs.org.uk/advice/search/profile.aspx?pid=101) is a process that many keen bulb-growers use to increase stocks of *Allium*, *Fritillaria*, *Hyacinthus* and *Narcissus* as well as *Galanthus*. Snowdrops are propagated in the dormant season (early summer), but John plans ahead. ‘I don’t have time to deadhead,’ he says, ‘so I sometimes get stray seedlings in a clump that aren’t true



CARPET OF COLOUR
In winter
Cyclamen coum dazzles below a rose pergola (above). *Galanthus* ‘Tubby Merlin’ (left) is one of many fine snowdrops grown at Gable House

to type. It is usually recommended to lift a dormant clump, but I’d probably stick the fork through the bulbs, and I could pick a bulb that isn’t the correct cultivar.’ So he lifts and pots up bulbs while still in flower, to chip in May or June.

Bulbs showing signs of disease or virus must be rejected, but chipping can sometimes avert disaster. John had one bulb of *G. ‘Cowhouse Green’*, a beautiful but rather difficult-to-grow snowdrop with soft stripes of pale green on its outer petals. When repotting in October, he found a fat grub (large narcissus fly) squatting smugly at its centre. Although

only a shell remained, he cleaned and chipped it – and was rewarded with several tiny but healthy bulbs.

John’s passion for gardening started in childhood. ‘My parents lived near Myddleton House [Enfield, Middlesex, home of plantsman Edward Augustus Bowles]. We often visited Gussie’s garden with the local gardening society. One time, my father bought a crown imperial, *Fritillaria imperialis* ‘Rubra’, from him. My mother said he’d wasted his 2/6d (12½p), as he wouldn’t get it to flower – but it still survives in our garden, flowering regularly.’



Extending the seasons, much as Bowles did, is the Fosters’ philosophy. ‘We plant in tiers: first, the canopy of trees; then shrubs; then herbaceous perennials; then bulbs. Dig anywhere here and you’ll find bulbs,’ says John. He is determined to squeeze as much interest as possible from the plot – even espalier apples sheltering the vegetable garden (they still grow almost all their fruit and veg) are festooned with mistletoe.

Rest of the garden

East of the house, where more vegetables and chrysanthemums once grew, beyond

three large glasshouses, and frames full of special crocus and other precious bulbs, the garden is bisected into areas designed for spring and summer (but their framework of choice trees and shrubs ensures year-round interest). Between them is a pergola swathed in roses and wisteria, a prime example of John’s tiered planting. In autumn, leaves of twining *Celastrus orbiculatus*, dazzling yellow, drift onto a dense, intricately patterned mat of scores of *Cyclamen coum*, grown from seed. Their glossy foliage, quietly attractive for months, undergoes a midwinter transformation

into a spectacular, sugar-pink flurry of flowers – the festive icing on this rich layer-cake of a garden, which is a delight to all who see it regardless of season. ■

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Open: 21 Feb, 6 Jun (for National Gardens Scheme) and 5 Sept. Groups welcome at other times by appointment.
● Read John Richards on the origins of yellow snowdrops in the March issue of *The Plantsman*; to subscribe, call 0845 062 1111

*** For snowdrop events this month, including the London Show, see the Events booklet enclosed in the Jan issue**