

Roy Lancaster visits... Foxgrove Plants

The earliest months of the year hold the greatest promise for galanthophiles, who will find plenty to excite them at this specialist nursery

Author: **Roy Lancaster**, VMH, author, broadcaster and member of the RHS Woody Plants Committee. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

Ask Louise Peters about her childhood memories and she will tell you of living on a farm in the Berkshire countryside. She was surrounded by her family and a garden full of flowers and vegetables, in which everyone shared an interest and some responsibility. Her aunt's love for ornamentals, especially perennials and bulbs, was contagious and when Louise was old enough she was taken to RHS London flower shows at Vincent Square as a special treat. Hardly surprising, therefore, that after leaving school in the 1980s she set up her own nursery in the family garden.

Initially she grew alpinas, but gradually, as the nursery became better known and facilities improved, she turned her attention to her favourite flowers – snowdrops – which have always thrived in the garden. Today, Foxgrove Plants is a

well-established specialist nursery with plastic tunnels, cold frames and raised beds where snowdrops in rich variety are grown and displayed for visitors to admire and buy. Many have also been planted out in the garden around the house, in informal drifts or as smaller groups in beds and borders, some with associated perennials and other early bulbous plants such as winter aconites, crocus and *Cyclamen coum*.

Propagation of more popular snowdrops by division, and the rarer cultivars by twin scaling, is a family affair, with Louise's mum and dad lending a hand and her husband Robert wielding the scalpel. Most of her snowdrops are available freshly lifted 'in the green' between February and early April both at the nursery and by mail order. She is also a regular exhibitor at the RHS London Plant and Design Show, held in February (see *The Garden*, January, p75).



Roy and nursery owner Louise Peters discuss the merits of a snowdrop.



Around the nursery, drifts of snowdrops mingle with crocus and winter aconites.



Galanthus elwesii var. *elwesii* 'Maidwell L' is tall and broad leaved.

Nursery information

Address Foxgrove Plants, Foxgrove, Enborne, Newbury, Berkshire RG14 6RE
Tel 01635 40554. **Fax** 01635 30555.

Website www.foxgroveplants.co.uk

Mail order available, no minimum order.

Plant lists online and by post (please send A5 SAE).

Open mid-Jan-end Oct, Thur-Sat, 10am-4pm; closed 1-2pm. For special visits please telephone to arrange an appointment.

✦ In addition to snowdrops and associated small bulbs, Foxgrove Plants offer a selection of perennials including *Helleborus x hybridus* Ashwood Garden hybrids in a wide range of colours as well as ornamental grasses.

✦ **RHS Snowdrop event:** 6 Feb; see Diary, p91.

✦ **Snowdrop Saturday:** 18 Feb, 10am-4pm, in aid of local church. View numerous snowdrops and meet fellow enthusiasts. Refreshments available. Ample parking. Admission £3.

FOXGROVE PLANTS



Galanthus 'Magnet' is one of the best known and most widely grown snowdrops.

Early visit

I visited the nursery on a wet, overcast day in February last year. The snowdrop blooms were not fully expanded, but this did not spoil my enjoyment given the stories and comments made by Louise as we toured the collection. First stop was a bench display to draw visitors' attention to the range available and help beginners in particular choose the most reliable. In pride of place was *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott', a particular favourite of mine and one of the best snowdrops to naturalise below deciduous trees and shrubs. It reaches 32cm (12½in), and Louise pointed out its 'sturdy growth and well-proportioned, globular blooms with a delicious honey-sweet scent'. I have it in my Hampshire garden forming patches beneath deciduous

shrubs where it never fails to attract visitors' attention.

Next to it was G. 'Magnet', another well-known hybrid and something of an 'old timer', given that it was raised more than a century ago. Less tall and robust than 'S. Arnott' at 23cm (9in), it is equal in garden merit differing most strikingly in the length of its slender pedicel (flower stalk). When fully developed, this can be as much as 5cm (2in) long, arching gracefully under the weight of the bloom. The slightest air movement sends its flowers gently swinging in a most pleasing manner.

Another must for beginners is the species *Galanthus elwesii*, of which there are many selections and hybrids. The best can be recognised by their large flowers and (usually) broad leaves of an attractive



bloomy, silvery-grey colour. Indeed, they are worth growing for their bold foliage alone. One such is *G. elwesii* 'Comet', a robust grower, its big, beautiful, shapely flowers with long outer segments carried on long, arching pedicels.

Different again is *G. elwesii* var. *elwesii* 'Maidwell L', a relatively tall 25cm (10in), vigorous snowdrop with broad leaves and large flowers. This was raised at Maidwell Hall in Northamptonshire by distinguished plantsman Oliver Wyatt. I have it growing in the lee of a beech hedge where it always performs well, although it increases only slowly. *Galanthus elwesii* 'Mrs Macnamara', to 18cm (7in), is considered by many enthusiasts, including Louise, to be one of the finest of all snowdrops. Its many qualities, not least its early flowering (normally in January, later in cold winters) and large flowers with slender outer segments, carried well clear of the relatively narrow blue-green foliage, make this a must for the garden.

Tales to tell

For those who love stories, the world of snowdrops is a rich source of plants named for people who raised or discovered them. 'Mrs Macnamara' apparently commemorates the poet Dylan Thomas's mother-in-law, who first gave bulbs to John Newell, a director of the John Innes Institute. *Galanthus* 'Mrs Thompson' was named for a lady from Escrick, near York who in 1950 sent flowering material to a meeting of the RHS Scientific Committee, whose then chairman was gardener, author and collector EA Bowles. A highly prized but curious snowdrop, 'Mrs Thompson' is variously described by galanthophiles as eccentric, quirky, beautiful, ugly, even a freak. This is a robust

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Broad-leaved *Galanthus plicatus* 'Augustus' (above) was named for plantsman EA (Edward Augustus) Bowles (1865–1954).

snowdrop of erratic behaviour, producing some stems (scapes) with two flowers as well as those with the normal one. Sometimes the two flowers have fused ovaries, like Siamese twins, or have more than the normal six segments. Louise pointed out a clump in her garden beneath a *Daphne mezereum*, the rose-pink, scented flowers of which are a perfect complement.

Other snowdrops I admired that day included 'Augustus' and 'Percy Picton', both selections of the

species *Galanthus plicatus* and both excellent garden plants at around 16cm (6in). 'Augustus' I enjoy in my own garden where it forms a dense, low ground cover of broad, blue-green leaves with a pale midrib, above which the large globular flowers are borne on relatively short scapes. It is a vigorous snowdrop and repays dividing regularly to encourage free flowering. 'Augustus' was named for her 'hero' EA Bowles by the late gardener and plants-woman Amy Doncaster, a near



Louise Peters (right) with Foxgrove Plants' display at the RHS London Plant and Design Show 2011.



Common snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) in flower for sale 'in the green' at the nursery (above), ready for visitors to choose or for mail-order distribution.

neighbour of mine who gave me my first named snowdrop ('S. Arnott') in the 1970s. 'Percy Picton' meanwhile, named for the plantsman and Michaelmas-daisy specialist of Old Court Nursery, Colwall in the Malverns, is slightly taller, with beautiful large flowers held over broad, arching foliage.

It is well known that growing snowdrops can become addictive. I have some 30 or 40 species and cultivars, a modest number compared with some collectors, and though I have – or think I have – firm control over new acquisitions, I have to admit that visiting Foxgrove Plants in the snowdrop season was tempting fate. Towards the end of the tour I saw two particular plants that had me hesitating. The first was *G. elwesii* 'Godfrey Owen' which, given that it was named by one of Britain's premier galanthophiles for



her late husband, is of proven quality. A relatively low-growing, early snowdrop, its exquisite blooms possess six outer and six inner segments, that moved a well-known author to describe it as one of the most distinct snowdrop discoveries of recent times.

Rivalling it in my eyes however, though quite different, was *Galanthus plicatus* 'Wendy's Gold', a beautiful snowdrop with distinctly broad foliage and well-proportioned blooms, displaying a golden ovary and a golden stain on the inner segments. I was tempted, so tempted – but won't say whether I did or did not succumb to my galanthophilic tendencies on this occasion. ●

***Galanthus plicatus* 'Wendy's Gold' (above) is much coveted for its rare golden ovary and markings. *Galanthus elwesii* 'Mrs Macnamara' (above top) has distinctive, slender outer segments above narrow, blue-green leaves.**



Berkshire nursery

House of commons

Galanthus nivalis (common snowdrop) is narrow in leaf and grows around 12cm (4¾in) high.

Foxgrove Plants sell several of the many selections. Among the more unusual are double, sterile *G. nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* 'Flore Pleno'. Known for more than 300 years, this plant has naturalised in many an orchard and churchyard. Neater and more desirable is *G. nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* 'Doncaster's Double Charmer', while *G. nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* 'Pusey Green Tips', with green-tipped outer segments to its double flowers, was found at Pusey in Oxfordshire.

Unusual too is *G. nivalis* 'Warei' for its conspicuous spathe (sheath) up to 11cm (4¾in) long, from which tumble beautifully formed single blooms, all six segments of which bear green apical markings. Notable are *G. nivalis* Scharlockii Group snowdrops, with characteristically split spathes (or 'donkey's ears') and green-smudged outer segments on their single blooms.

www.rhs.org.uk To watch a video of Roy Lancaster talking about some of his favourite snowdrops, visit 'Latest issue' at www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

