

Outdoors/gardening

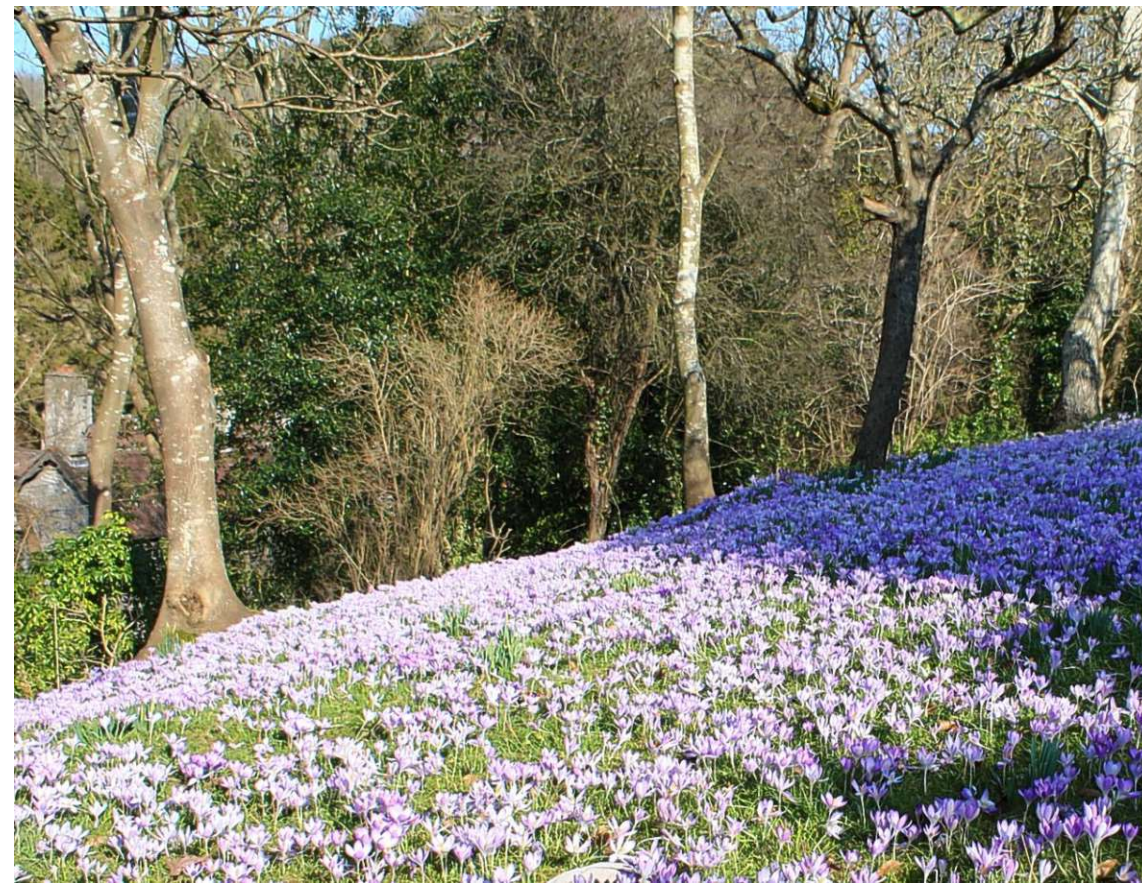


Dear Alan...

I want to grow some first early potatoes in containers in my greenhouse. I have tried this before but did not have very good results. I used a multipurpose compost but should I have used ordinary top soil from my garden? Also, we have a peace lily (Spathiphyllum) in our bathroom and it has flowered in the past but not for two or three years. Last year it was re-potted and has been fed with Baby Bio feed once a week through the spring and summer but still refuses to produce any flowers. What are we doing wrong?

Ray Hook

Potatoes – you should certainly not use garden soil for these. Multipurpose or potting compost is best. Perhaps the potatoes got too hot in your greenhouse and made too much leaf and not enough tubers? Once the risk of frost has passed, your container-grown potatoes are probably better outside in a sheltered spot. Peace Lily (Spathiphyllum, pictured) – I suspect that you would have better results by using a high-potash feed such as Phostrogen or a tomato feed. Baby Bio is fine for foliage plants but a feed with higher potash content will encourage blooms.



Colourful crocuses are not just pleasing to the eye – they also attract wildlife, including vital species such as bees, below

Praise be to the gardeners who planned for our benefit

Cleeve Nursery Tips with ALAN DOWN



SEE THEM YOURSELF...

A selection of good naturalised bulbs can be seen now at the following: Colesbourne Manor, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. www.snowdrop.org.uk Painswick Rococo Garden, Painswick, Gloucestershire. www.rococogarden.co.uk Forde Abbey, Chard, Somerset. www.fordeabbey.co.uk East Lambrook Manor Garden, South Petherton, Somerset. www.eastlambrook.com Snowdrop Valley, Wheddon Cross, Exmoor. www.wheddoncross.org.uk Lacock Abbey, Lacock, Chippenham, Wiltshire. Cleeve gardens, including my friend's, will be open in aid of Holy Trinity Church, Cleeve, on Sunday, June 5.

It's at this time of year that we are especially thankful to those who planned ahead!

Sheets of bulbs are a sight to behold! But someone, a few years back, had the foresight and energy to get things started! Once established, and given the right conditions and management, they just spread! Now, I'm not suggesting that the valleys like those in Herefordshire or the one by Wheddon Cross on Exmoor were planted! These special places are filled with native snowdrops that have been there since who knows when.

But sheets of snowdrops at places like the Rococo Gardens at Painswick near Stroud or Colesbourne Park not far from Cheltenham will have certainly benefited from some generous forward-planning.

Similarly, a friend's garden close to me in Cleeve will be spectacular soon due to planting several generations ago! This is a garden that is not filled with snowdrops, although there are plenty of these too, but with sheets of the palest shade of lilac-mauve crocus. Now not every crocus will settle down and spread quite as easily

as this one, for this is *Crocus thomasi*. Sure, they are getting a bit of help from the current generation who thoughtfully delay grass cutting until after the seed has dispersed. Clumps are also lifted and transplanted to increase the size of the patch most years too!

This is a species that is well worth planting, but you will more than likely find it for sale named Whitewell Purple. If you are planning to plant many, then autumn would be the best time to do it but, like snowdrops, pot-grown plants are fairly widely available now and are probably easier to get established.

Whether it's snowdrops or crocuses, these early bulbs will be host to masses of early foraging bees of both the wild and hive types. Both will relish the early feast that they provide.

There are many local gardens with good displays of early bulbs and what better way to get inspiration for your own plot! If we don't play our part now by planting bulbs to naturalise, then generations to come will miss the kind of spectacle that we currently enjoy.



With Cleeve Nursery's Alan Down Contact Alan at Cleeve Nursery, near Bristol, on 01934 832134. If you would like to ask Alan Down a gardening question, visit www.cleevenursery.co.uk and click on the Ask Us A Question tab. Alan can answer only emailed questions



The carpet of snowdrops that greet visitors to the National Trust's Newark Park, Ozleworth, near Wotton-Under-Edge in Gloucestershire

Striking purple plant is one of a kind in the border

PLANT OF THE WEEK: PITTIOSPORUM TOM THUMB

There are remarkably few purple leaf evergreens. There are masses of golden, silver and variegated ones so that makes this particularly valuable!

'Tom Thumb' is a compact form of its small-leaf parent, *Pittosporum tenuifolium*. Now *Pittosporum* have always been valued by flower arrangers, but in recent years this is a species that we have been increasingly planting as a good alternative to conifer hedges. Not of course Tom Thumb because, as the name suggests, this is a very small plant! With its dark purple and indeed almost black leaves in winter, this is a very striking addition to any planting scheme. Alongside the shrubby silky leaf *Convolvulus cneorum* or perhaps underplanted with the lamb's ears plant (*Stachys byzantina* Silver Carpet), the effect is very striking any day of the year. Contrast seasonal snowdrops or white daffodil *Thalia*, Silver Chimes or Jenny.

It can be grown in containers or borders, but choose a sunny spot.



Plot Lines with FIONA SANDERSON

It's early days yet, but there's already a noticeable shift in the vegetable garden, with lots of new life beginning to appear.

Buds on gooseberry bushes look tasty enough for the local birdlife to swing by and take a munch, so these will benefit from some netting as soon as possible. Our late autumn-sown broad beans are all popping up lovely leafy rosettes underneath some fleece that should keep the birds off too.

This week, I've been digging over a very weedy patch on the allotment, and, I hope, winning the battle of the bindweed and the buttercup, which have had their way on that patch for years. It spent all of last year covered up with some thick black plastic, which has made the task of getting the weeds out properly a much easier one.

It takes a lot to weaken the vigour of a determined perennial weed, but black plastic, and a persistent gardener, will prevail. I have also seen gardeners layer thick cardboard directly over the top of very weedy ground, then mulch it, and pierce the cardboard in order to plant right through. This avoids digging altogether, but does demand more raw materials.

Speaking of vigour, a few winter survivors deserve a mention this week. Our flat-leaved parsley is tasting lovely; the fresh growth seems to have a nicer flavour than the older leaves I remember from last summer, and the few large clumps we have of it are producing

enough for us to pick a small bag each week. If we don't use it, it freezes well, but mostly it goes straight into a salad, or soup.

Similarly, the more traditional curly leaved parsley is picking up after the months of cold, too. Fresh small chard leaves also make a welcome addition to the winter salads that are so different in character from our summer salad bowl. Our winter salads contain a lot more herbs, which are often harder than lettuce and other fairweather salad leaves, and, I like to think, are giving us a health boost too.

But it's the chives that are most noticeably perky and raring to go. I like to use chives as a bed edging where they are valuable as slug and snail barriers, and later, when they flower, they are great for butterflies and other wildlife. We find that the more chives we grow, the more we eat, which says a lot for the all-round value of this rather humble herb.

If you haven't got your seed potatoes yet, then don't leave it too much longer. They were selling out fast last weekend at the allotment shop in Nicolas Lane, Bristol, (in the pavilion on the allotment site). Both Talbot Rd allotment shop, in Knowle, as well as the one on Nicolas Lane, in St George's, are open Saturday and Sunday mornings, selling seeds, composts and other gardening sundries much cheaper than you'll find anywhere else, and you don't have to be an allotmenter to go along.

Drop in to the snowdrop valley

NATIONAL GARDEN SCHEME

Avon Cottage, in Salisbury, Wiltshire, will open in aid of the scheme on Sunday from 11am-3pm. It is set in a beautiful unspoilt valley featuring snowdrops along the stream and woodland with aconites, crocus, heliobores, erythroniums and other spring bulbs. Mature hedges break up the level site with early flowering, fragrant shrubs. There are lovely views over the working water meadows to the river Avon with abundant birdlife.

It is about four miles north of Salisbury off Woodford Valley Road, between the A360 & A345. Call 01722 782295 or email: sheila.shepherd@virgin.net for more details. It will also open on April 17.

Also in Wiltshire, Boscombe Village Gardens will open on Sunday and Monday, and also February 27 and 28. It is about seven miles north of Salisbury on the A338 just past Boscombe & District Social Club. There is much to discover in two contrasting gardens. Westcroft's wilderness paradise is much loved by wildlife but there is an area with bind weed. Enjoy a pond, sun-baked terraces, colour-themed herbaceous planting, naturalised chalk bank with orchids and climbing roses over old fruit trees. Cottage in the Trees has been immaculately planted, with a water feature, raised vegetable patch, small wildlife pond and gravel garden.

The NGS gardens raises over £2 million each year for nursing, caring and gardening charities



Read **Dirty Nails'** expert gardening hints and tips in our two pages of gardens every Tuesday in the Western Daily Press

For Good Advice & Excellent Home Grown Plants
visit your local nursery!

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