

Galanthus in January, Adonis in February? Madison's English Winter (Or, Musings of A. Hort Hound)

From *Perennial Notes*, Newsletter of the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society, June 2002

It was on the evening of February 19th that I found a message on my answering machine from Monika Burwell (Kurt Bluemel's sister) of Earthly Pursuits in Maryland. The *Adonis amurensis* that had been back-ordered for over a year was now ready for shipment. When did I want it? My first inkling was that Monika was out of her mind, for after all, this was Wisconsin, not South Carolina. I am sure the likes of John Ellsley can plant Adonis any old time!! But, on second thought, knowing that her source was a Dutch grower who ships the plant bare root, it seemed logical (?) that I accept the order rather than have the roots continue to shrivel in cold storage in Maryland.

In the meantime, the unprecedented winter without winter was continuing around me. On February 24, the mercury cracked 62, setting a record high for the date. I received an excited call from the Guru of All Things Green—his clumps of Adonis were in full bloom—come right over and take a gander. We both marveled at this earliest ever appearance of the flowers of one of our favorite plants. A few days later, my own shriveled roots of Adonis arrived in the mail, just as the February spring was eclipsed by a sudden fall in temperature.

On morning of March 1st, I set out with trowel in hand to plant Adonis. The temperature read 13 degrees on the thermometer as I scraped away an inch of snow from the mulch of pine straw. Mrs. A Hort Hound was certain one of the neighbors would see me and call 911, thinking that I had lost my marbles. Unbelievably, beneath the mulch, there was not the slightest bit of frost in the ground as I thrust the trowel in the rich, moist earth to make a space for the not-so-good-looking bare roots.

That night 8 inches of snow fell and it was followed by three days of below zero temperatures, the only such days of the entire winter. In fact, the first two weeks of March were colder than the first two weeks of February. However, Adonis fared quite well!! (But not those shriveled roots I am sorry to say.)

Most folks forget that the growing season in these parts ended on the 7th of October with a record low temperature of 23 degrees, finishing off all of the tender annuals. However, instead of the harbinger of a prolonged winter, the minimum temperature did not fall to 23 degrees again until December 9th. In fact December 5th brought an all-time high of 64 degrees for the entire month of December.

These were truly extraordinary times. We had parsley from the garden on Christmas Day (well all right, I cut it a few days before Christmas). Well into December there were flowers on *Corydalis lutea*, and foliage on the epidmediums and golden feverfew showed no signs of winter's grip. December 14th was, incredibly, the first day that the temperature did not rise above freezing. Though there was a little snow for Christmas, the record warmth persisted throughout the month of January, culminating in the flowering of *Galanthus nivalis* (snowdrops) during the last week of of the month. I think Lake Mendota was frozen over for a grand total of 3 days.

In contrast, the spring was quite cool with adequate rainfall. There were two terrible days in late April when record high temperatures in the mid 80's shriveled the splendid flowers of *Chionodoxa gigantea*, *Iris reticulata* and *Iris danfordiae*. This brief, torrid flower-busting period of heat ended abruptly with a another gardener's nightmare—a thunderstorm whose marble size hail, straight-line winds, and torrential downpours decimated the daffodils, especially the very large flowered ones with delicate substance like D. 'Professor Einstein', with its white perianth and orange crown.

If it hadn't been for these two days, the spring would have been nearly perfect for those of us gardening in the city. Despite 4 consecutive days or so below freezing in the third week of May (do you recall that the last day below freezing in 2001 was April 18?), there was very little frost damage in my garden, despite the heavily frosted leaves of the hardy geraniums noted one morning. Guess that's why they're hardy!

This was my third year of converting my large pots of summer flowering annuals into pots of spring bulbs (reusing the same soil), and by far the most successful. In fact, I write without any humility in describing my success. The bloom period from these half-dozen large pots extended over two months, beginning with the early blooming bulbs planted near the surface, and ending with late blooming bulbs like the lily-flowered tulips planted on the very bottom of the pots. They were planted up in late November and stowed in the crawl space underneath the house.

This year I wised up and removed the pots from this shelter at the end of February just as the foliage of *C. tommasinianus* began to emerge. The cold and snow of the first two weeks of March required protection with a heavy tarp, but I discerned no damage to the bulbs or the pots. The show began with *C. tommasinianus*. Though it has lovely pale lavender flowers, it is the only bulb that I would not repeat next year. Though lovely in its birth, its death is truly agonizing as the blossoms in their death throws collapse overnight into wet noodles hanging languidly over the edges of the pot. They reminded me of those plucked fowl you always see strung up by their necks in Asian food markets.

Next year, I'll try those gaudy fat Dutch hybrid crocuses instead. Perhaps in death they will be less dramatic. The crocuses were followed by a beautiful display of *Tulip kaufmania* type and *T. humilis* 'Persian Pearl'. Next followed the large *Daffodil* 'Professor Einstein', with its enormous flowers with orange cups, though as noted above, subject to severe hail damage in late April. A daffodil with a pale yellow perianth and pink cup, 'Ipi Tombi' followed Prof Einstein and held up very well in the cooler weather. The piece de resistance was a combination of the later-flowering small daffodil D. 'Hawera', blooming in sync with the two-toned purple-blue flowering *Muscaria latifolium* (my favorite grape hyacinth).

D. 'Hawera' can be lost in the garden unless planted in mass and, unfortunately, does not persist in Wisconsin gardens. However, it was definitely the star of the spring pot show. Holding up to five small pale yellow blossoms per stem and with up to 20 bulbs per pot, the flowers resembled swarms of yellow butterflies dancing in the spring breezes. And best of all, the flowers did not come out all at once and the bloom time was more than three weeks, owing to the cool weather we had during this period. The persistent flowers accompanied the late flowering dwarf tulips *T. batalinii* 'Yellow Jewel' and the flashy satin rose T. 'Mariette' and the elegant ivory T. Elegant Lady whose petal edges are flushed with violet. The latter two are the tall lily-flowering types, appropriately rising well above the foliage of the other spent bulbs in the pots. These flowers lasted until May 31.

Speaking of tulips, I do hope you made it down to Janesville in May to see the spectacular tulip display at Janesville Rotary Gardens. Mark Dwyer and crew planted 50 bulbs of 500 different varieties planted in a mind boggling checkerboard color design. It was thought to include all of the commercially available varieties of tulips in the U.S., and the cost was something like \$30,000. I fell for a very tall lily-flowering tulip—T. 'Blushing Lady' whose blended colors of sunset orange, rosy pink, and a softer yellow cannot be appreciated with mere words. I was also smitten by the lily-flowered 'Mona Lisa' which was primrose yellow with raspberry flames.

The best of the extensive display species tulips was *T. chusiana* 'Lady Jane', one of the softer colored candy cane types of rose and ivory. Can't wait to try these out in the garden next year. By the way, they are planning to leave the tulips in place until next spring in order to complete the evaluation progress. Roy Klehm and John Ellsley had preceded my visit by one day and were also said to have been wowed by the display.

Moving off the subject of bulbs, I was amazed at how well the woodies do when there is no winter. *Acer palmatum* (Japanese maples) and the oakleaf hydrangeas (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) came through with absolutely no die back. In fact, I have found a flower bud at the end of nearly every branch of the oakleaves, about 15 in all. Should be a spectacular summer display. And I am thrilled at *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* (the Japanese hydrangea vine) on the white oak by the front door. It is covered with blooms this spring, and its single sterile flower petals are larger than those of *Hydrangea anomala* ssp *petiolaris*, which is fast becoming a signature plant for Madison area gardens. It is reportedly less hardy than *H. anomala*, but seems to grow faster for me and has very attractive leaves with serrated edges, though its fall color is not nearly as attractive as *H. anomala*. I am told that both vines occur together in the same mountainous regions of Japan.

My most relished woody achievement this spring was with *Enkianthus campanulatus*. It's a rather narrow upright shrub with layered branches and tufted, whirled foliage. It was purchased in 1992 from Day Star Nursery in Maine for its proclaimed hardiness. However, it never had more than a few blooms before this year, when it was covered with small creamy red-veined bells, the red veins becoming more prominent towards the end of the three-week blooming period. It was almost worth waiting 10 years for (I did say almost), but it also has wonderful fall color which makes it, along with its graceful habitus, well worth growing.

Perhaps because the spring progressed rather slowly, I was able to accomplish several projects that had been in my mind for several years. The first was a rather simple task. But I finally did it. I broke up several of the largest clumps of *Galanthus nivalis* (snow drops) in early May and spread them around the garden, "in the green" to other spots. Also, I did the same with *Eranthis hyemalis* (winter aconite) another bulb you are admonished to divide "in the green" because the small bulbs shipped in the fall are very slow to establish in large colonies.

Speaking of the latter, in April of 2001 I harvested a cup of these seeds from my mother-in-law's garden near Philadelphia. Spreading them around the edges of the garden path, I am happy to report that hundreds germinated this spring though they only passed through the dicotyledon stage (two-leaf stage). I understand it may take three or four years for them to come into bloom along the lushly planted paths. Now don't laugh—yes "lushly planted" (euphemism for impassable). However, I am a firm believer that garden paths should be wide enough for one person, walking sideways—none of this two people walking abreast stuff so hallowed in England.

The second project was more time consuming. After several years of critical comments by Mrs. A Hort Hound regarding the two-bit filtering system for my pond, I finally bit the bullet this spring with the help of Bob Risser at The Frog Bog in Verona, though I am sure that Bob got tired of seeing my face on successive mornings at 0800 for days on end when he opened for business. It involved getting the stone mason to take off some of the topping stone to install the pipes through the wall needed for an outside filtering system. And while I was at it, the electrical system was redone as well. Needless to say I am very pleased with the results, though many dollars poorer.

Some of you may know that three years ago Bob gave up his career of 18 years as a mail carrier to make a business out of his passion. Indeed, he is the most knowledgeable person in the Madison area when it comes to setting up and maintaining a pond. He is the driving force behind the Madison Area Pond Society, which recently had its big pond tour of Madison's West side ponds. What many of you might not know is that Bob began his career working at Felly's, after getting a degree in Landscape Architecture from UW in the mid 1970's. For a brief time, he even had a business—called Naturally—that sold mostly houseplants on State Street near the Capitol Square.

A third spring project was the completion of a shady trough garden. I have always envied my NARGS friends who have alpine troughs all over their gardens. It is not possible to grow alpiners in a shade garden, but for the past two seasons I have admired the shady plant troughs in the display garden at the Flower Factory.

Again, I am very pleased with the results, as I am now able to display the newer varieties of mini-hostas that are available, as well as my collection of dwarf epimediums and ferns. These were simply lost in the garden previously. I do foresee that this is going to be a very high-maintenance item, so stay tuned to see what I have to say about this in a couple of years. I kind of put it in the same category as water gardening in the shade, for which I had very little guidance when I began 5 years ago, but now am rather free with advice on the subject!

I did get the usual number of mail order plants in the mail this year. Most exciting to date were the new *Tricyrtis* from Barry Yinger's Asiatica. One particularly stood out—*Tricyrtis nana* 'Karasuba' (translation = crow leaf)—with deep purple foliage, which reportedly has yellow flowers! I am licking my chops with anticipation of that color combination! I am also pleased to report on my success with *Eremerus robustus* (foxtail lilies, desert lilies), planted two years ago. Do you recall the spectacular clump on last June's WHPS tour in the garden of Rita Dupuis? The bulbs (?) measure 10 inches across and resemble a dried octopus. Though everything I read about these bulbs said they should not thrive in my garden (prefers full sun, dislike lots of summer moisture, Zone 6 hardiness, good drainage essential), their giant green fists came thrusting out of the soil in April. As of June 9, their flower stalks are approaching 6 feet without any open blossoms. I suspect they will be in full bloom the moment after I leave for the WHPS trip to England.

For those of you who were in the garden in late April on the WHPS tour, I did manage to identify those two epimediums so many visitors asked about. They both had purple foliage and lavender/purple flowers. One was *Epimedium* 'Yubae' (large, dark purple flowers) and the other was *E. grandiflora* var 'Violaceum' (small lavender flowers). Thanks to all of those who dropped by—your comments meant a lot to me and it has kept me going strong.

All things considered, it has been a wonderful spring for gardeners, aided by the mildest winter in memory. As I biked through the Arboretum and crossed Curtis Prairie on my way to work one beautiful morning in the waning days of May, the goldfinches accompanied me with their bobbing up and down flight and the perennial indigo bunting serenaded me from the skeleton of the Jackson Oak. I admired the islands of *Dodecatheon media* (shooting stars) scattered throughout the newly-emerging grasses, as well as the hints of blue indicating where the lupines would be in full bloom in a week or so. Passing on to the Longnecker Gardens, I admired the still beautiful display of lilacs, with their heavenly fragrance in the air, as the last flutterings of the crabapple blossoms fell to the ground.

Climbing up the hill to the pinetum and magnolia collection, I couldn't help but think how wonderful it was to be a gardener. Imagine the alternative—I could be putt-putting around a wide expanse of lawn somewhere, dismounting occasionally to whack away at a ridiculously small white orb, the object of the whole process being to deposit the orb into a tiny tin cup. Though, I suppose, we have to give England credit (?) for the game of golf, it will not stop me from leering at these open areas of green nothingness usurping good garden space as the WHPS traverses the UK in June.

—A. Hort Hound