

episode 50 show notes and advice

January in the garden can be quite grey. But there are some beautiful plants that are just coming out now like snowdrops. For this episode, Sarah talks to Graham Gough, who she first met when she was interning at Great Dixter and Graham at Washfield Nursery nearby. Graham is the owner of [Marchants Hardy Plants](#), specialising in grasses and herbaceous perennials, and he is also a galanthophile – a lover and collector of snowdrops. With snowdrops providing us with such optimism right now, Sarah asks Graham to tell us more about the wonderful world of Galanthus.

In this episode, discover:

- How Graham first got into snowdrops
- Two brilliant ideas for displaying snowdrops
- Graham recommends the best varieties for starting a snowdrop collection
- Why picking flowers is the best way to learn about them

Episode 50 advice sheet

Snowdrops - it's a mad, mad world

Graham starts off by declaring that the world of galanthophiles is mad and always has been. Snowdrop collecting goes back to Edwardian times, with notable collectors including the Elwes family at [Colesbourne](#) estate, and Augustus Bowles, who both have snowdrops bearing their names.

Graham has been collecting for 40 years and his interest began while working at Washfield nursery for [Elizabeth Strangman](#). She was part of the snowdrop cognoscenti and Graham got drawn in. He attended snowdrop parties and looked after the snowdrops in the garden. There would be offsets on the bulbs and he would pinch them, take them home to Newhaven, Sussex and he developed a good snowdrop collection, growing them on chalk. Marchants Nursery have built their reputation with grasses and herbaceous plants. But snowdrops are a nice filler in January. Snowdrops can flower early, from November, and go right the way through to May, but January and February really are the months of the snowdrop. This is when Graham has the least amount of work in the garden and can give snowdrops his full attention. He sells around 50 different snowdrops, via mail order and sales. They also attend snowdrop galas where a collector once bought a bulb off Graham for £165.

The soaring price of snowdrops

Snowdrops are so expensive because the demand is there, says Graham. It is the equivalent of Tulip mania in 17th century Holland. Prices are driven by auction and go into the thousands for a single bulb. Everyone wonders when the bubble will burst. It is tailing off a bit, 3-5 years ago you could name your price. Graham has never paid more than £15 for a bulb. With one fat *Galanthus* bulb you can propagate it and cut it into 32 pieces, it is a 3-year process. The snowdrops Graham sells are lifted rather than propagated.

Graham always sells potted bulbs in the green. As he only sells plants in flower, he gets to choose the best plants and he digs them out 3-4 days before selling. The potting shed, when full of snowdrops, is like entering fairy land. He used to sell them by candlelight which was magical.

Sarah's two defining snowdrop moments

When Sarah's daughter Molly was born, her friend Pip Morrison brought her a gift of beautiful [Galanthus 'S. Arnott'](#) snowdrops. Not only was this memorable because of the occasion, Sarah was also delighted to find out how easily they naturalised after she planted them out. Within 3 years she could lift and divide a massive snowdrop clump to spread around the garden, planting at the same level, and off they'd go.

Graham says 'S. Arnott' is a truly fantastic snowdrop, always part of his core collection. He recalls garden designer [Mary Keens](#), having a bank of hard to beat 'S. Arnott' in her garden.

Snowdrops Bannerman style

Sarah's second key snowdrop moment was visiting the garden of her friends [Julian and Isabel Bannerman](#). They had a snowdrop theatre, like an auricular theatre but in January, with lots of terracotta pots filled with different snowdrop varieties, including some very rare snowdrops, all with handwritten labels.

They also had a genius stone trough under [wisteria](#) which would drop its leaves in November. The trough was packed full of autumn flowering [Cyclamen hederifolium](#), followed by *Galanthus 'S. Arnott'* and [Cyclamen coum](#) in January, then down would come the flowering wisteria – it must have cost a fortune to create but it was there for a lifetime, with layers like you find at Great Dixter.

Read Sarah's [Planting snowdrops](#) article for more detail on the Bannerman way with snowdrops.

Snowdrop pilgrimage

To see snowdrops at their best, Graham recommends a visit to [Walsingham Abbey](#) in Norfolk. Apparently, snowdrops were passed on by pilgrims on the road to Compostela – Walsingham is at the end of that pilgrimage route. To see them there is truly awe-inspiring.

Building a collection

If building a snowdrop collection, you need to keep different cultivars apart so they don't cross-breed. But Graham rather likes the randomness of how they can seed and has raised many new plants he has named, including one after his dad 'Albie RN' – RN because he served in the Royal Navy.

For starting your own collection Graham recommends 'S. Arnott' - not only is it beautiful, it's also easy to raise and establish. And wonderful for scent – like very rich honey. Snowdrops can be very scented and warmth brings out their perfume.

He also recommends [Galanthus elwesii var. monostictus](#) which hangs like a lantern and has distinct convolute leaves, monostictus means it has one marking at the apex – the bottom of the flower. This plant holds itself in an arch and hangs like a lantern. Graham has grown it for years and it has such quality.

Graham isn't so keen on unusually coloured snowdrops, these are more for collectors. And while snowdrops en masse in January and February is a wonderful thing, he finds snowdrops in October or April feel rather out of place - like strawberries at Christmas.

Snowdrop care tips

People don't realise how wonderful snowdrop foliage is – after flowering the foliage, in many species, is quite shiny and reflects light well into May and beyond. Narcissus fly also attacks snowdrops so Graham's tip is to tear off dying foliage and put a mulch on.

Snowdrops like a warm summer to ripen their bulbs and induce their flowers. At Great Dixter they cut their grass very late because in dappled shade areas they have their snowdrops and in sunny areas their crocus. A late cut in December will really show off early bulbs. Graham says he tries to put a last cut in before anything has emerged and bulbs look so much better. Between October and December grass can put on so much growth.

Picking snowdrops?

Snowdrops certainly are for picking says Graham. You pay so much attention and learn so much more when you have a vase of flowers on your table. For snowdrops, pick where there is an abundance. Sarah's father, who was a botanist, had a pick 1 in 100 rule, which Sarah followed. As a child she would then get to have flowers by her bed, to get to know

them, to care about them and their habitat – this was a life-defining influence on her and a huge part of why she is now a gardener.

Sarah will certainly be planting more snowdrops in the green this spring, they will gradually naturalise, the more the merrier.