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Seriously Obsessed With Snowdrops

By ANNE MARIE CHAKER



Jonathan Hanson for The Wall Street Journal

From left to right: Bess, valued at \$100; Merlin, \$100; Lady Elphinstone, \$15; Lady Beatrix Stanley, \$50; South Hayes, \$25; and Spindelstone Surprise, \$75.

To those who love and collect snowdrops, little distinctions make these bulbs worth the hunt: The tiny green mark on "Robin Hood" is a faint X, while that of "S. Arnott" looks more like an upside-down heart. "Mrs. McNamara" has a small, slim V.

"You start looking at them a little closer, and you get stuck on these tiny, minute differences, and it all starts making sense," says Michael Loos, a collector in Ovid, N.Y. "And the biggest excitement about snowdrops is that they start blooming now."

Something happens in the last days of winter, as the little white flowers pop through snow, signaling spring before the litany of tulips and daffodils steal the show. The snowdrop—so small, you have to bend down and look—holds its own in the garden because of its lively appearance when everything else looks dead. Lately, it has earned something of a cult following among hard-core gardeners and plant collectors in the United States, following its popularity in England, where tour buses trek out to snowdrop fields in February. Hundreds of new varieties have been discovered in recent years, thanks to its growing legion of fans, who are known in the gardening world as galanthophiles, named after the snowdrop's Latin name, *Galanthus*.

Elise du Pont, heir to the Wawa chain of convenience stores and wife of former Delaware Gov. Pierre S. du Pont IV, says she scavenges a country dump near her home in Rockland, Del., where snowdrop bulbs sometimes inadvertently get tossed out with other garden scraps, and sprout through the soil. "There, you find the best *Galanthus*," says Ms. du Pont, an avid gardener and competitor in flower shows. These days, she is coveting a pink variety she has heard about. "I don't know where to find it, but I'm going to find out."



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The common snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis*, on the Winterthur Museum grounds in Delaware.

Subtle differences among varieties—whether it's a mark, shape or the period in which it blooms—combined with rarity, cause prices to vary widely. Brent and Becky's Bulbs, in Gloucester, Va., offers five bulbs of "S. Arnott" for \$16.25. Carolyn's Shade Gardens in Bryn Mawr, Pa., sells "Magnet" for \$25 each. Hitch Lyman, owner of Temple Nursery in Trumansburg, N.Y., selects about 35 varieties from his 300-plus collection each year and sells them in limited quantities for as much as \$50 per bulb—which always sell out.

"The snowdrop crazies are crazy, and they love the smallest difference," Mr. Lyman says. "And since I'm one of them, I'm aware it's not a normal preoccupation."

Take "Mrs. McNamara." Named after Welsh poet Dylan Thomas's mother-in-law, who apparently collected this variety, its most distinctive characteristic is an early bloom period of about a month before most other snowdrops flower. Each year, Jonathan Shaw, a Sandwich, Mass., collector who boasts more than 100 different snowdrop varieties, hosts a "Snowdrop Tea" where he auctions off some rare varieties, and gives away more-common ones for attendees to take home. At this year's tea, he auctioned single bulbs for three different unusual varieties, including "Mrs. McNamara," earning a total of about \$100 to benefit charity.

Mr. Shaw estimates he has roughly 8,000 snowdrops currently in bloom, mainly along paths around his garden. After more than three decades of collecting them, however, he says it's futile to really know exactly how many he has. "It's like counting a cloud," he says.

While many flower bulbs are crossed to produce hybrids of every possible shape, color and size, the vast majority of snowdrop varieties are simply found in nature, rather than bred in greenhouses. Two varieties might cross in someone's backyard, creating seedlings with different characteristics from their parents. This kind of serendipity adds to its allure.

In his 2001 book "Snowdrops," English horticulturist and principal author Matt Bishop describes 500 varieties known at the time. He and his co-authors are now working on a second volume, and it's proving to be a challenge.

"In the last 10 years, there are at least 1,000, if not 1,500, new names in circulation. Because of the mania, everyone is finding new things and putting names on them, whether they deserve them or not," says his co-author John Grimshaw, gardens manager at Colesbourne Park, one of England's noted snowdrop collections.

And while some finds are distinctive, in others, differences are so minuscule, he says, "they shouldn't be selected."



Jonathan Hanson for The Wall Street Journal

Snowdrop collector David Culp holds a box of *Flore Pleno*.

On a February trip to England a few years ago, Downingtown, Pa., horticulturist and snowdrop collector David L. Culp came across a snowdrop with slight yellow markings instead of the typical green ones. "It was like winning Powerball when I saw it," he recalls. "I was in the forest with friends and we all ran and fell to our knees." It is expected to be sold in Europe next year. It is also named after him. "It's my little chance at immortality," he says.

Trade restrictions on snowdrops mean American collectors can't freely purchase varieties sold in overseas catalogs and nurseries. In 1990, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora listed snowdrops as vulnerable in their wild habitats of Turkey, requiring protection from excessive collecting. That is why imports and exports of snowdrops require more permits than many other plants.

Christopher Herbstritt, a biologist in suburban Washington, D.C., has been gradually amassing a snowdrop collection over the past decade, now numbering about 30 varieties. The most he ever paid for a snowdrop was about \$150, for a yellow variety called "Wendy's Gold." The cost of the bulb itself was about \$60, but rose significantly due to inspections and paperwork

required on the part of the exporting English nursery.



Winston Wood

Snowdrops, seen recently in a field in Paris, Va., are one of the earliest blooming bulbs of spring.

To circumvent some of these retail channels, many American galanthophiles find one another and trade bulbs.

"I'll give you 10 'Lady Beatrix Stanley' for one 'Mighty Atom,'" offers Mr. Culp as an example of a fair trade.

In Medina, Wash., nursery bulb buyer Jim Fox says he finds most varieties in his own snowdrop collection "through the grapevine. I find out who has collections, and who's a good trader."

At times when he has gone through the expense and bother of importing, he makes sure he invests in a variety that's not only unusual in the U.S., but will also multiply nicely, providing more stock for future trades.

One of Mr. Fox's favorite snowdrop gifts was a handful of *Galanthus reginae-olgae*, an early-flowering species. "In a few years I had 60. I was able to spread that around to other galanthophiles," he says.

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