

Coveted blooms

Snowdrops provide first delicate signs of spring — and can be objects of desire for plant collectors

BY NINA A. KOZIOŁ

Special to the Tribune

It may be too early (or too painful) to think about the soon-to-come big chill, blowing snow and diminishing daylight, but — trust us — people who plant snowdrops are thinking about winter. Plotting, even.

Why? Because, for starters, early-blooming snowdrop bulbs need to be tucked into soil now, to prepare for their big moment as a telltale sign of impending spring. And then there's the burgeoning snowdrop craze — an urge to possess rare varieties of snowdrop that calls to mind the historical mania for tulips.

Snowdrops belong to the genus *Galanthus* and are native to a vast area across Europe. They are wildly popular in England and in Germany, where aficionados hold snowdrop galas and festivals.

In 2012, a single snowdrop bulb, 'Elizabeth Harrison,' sold on eBay to the English seed company Thompson & Morgan for about \$1,100, doubling the auction price of the previous year's record holder, 'Green Tear' snowdrop.

David Culp, author of "The Layered Garden" (Timber Press, 312 pages, \$34.95), began collecting snowdrops 20 years ago after visiting gardens in England.

"There weren't many of them to choose from in those days," he said. But now his garden in Pennsylvania sports more than 160 kinds. He hosts a snowdrop "tea" with some 20 or so hard-core snowdrop collectors, leads tours to England to see snowdrops in bloom and has organized a snowdrop seminar each March at Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Del., which draws more than 200 attendees.

"What's interesting about the

flowers is the inner horseshoe, which can have great variation depending on the species," Culp said. "And, what's wonderful are the markings." There are snowdrops marked with gold and primrose, and there's one named David Culp that he found growing in the wild in England. "The great thing is that growing snowdrops has trained my eye to look at the slightest nuance in (all) flowers."

Of course, there are more practical considerations too: "One thing I like is that they're so early, of course," said Scott Kunst, owner of Old House Gardens, a mail-order company in Ann Arbor, Mich., that specializes in heirloom and unusual bulbs. "Most nongardeners seem to think spring starts with daffodils and tulips, but that's weeks after snowdrops bloom, so why wait?"

The common snowdrop — *Galanthus nivalis* — is widely available through bulb catalogs and in some garden centers.

"I'm always recommending Elwes snowdrops (*Galanthus elwesii*) to gardeners, because they look like traditional snowdrops but just a little bit bigger and more robust," Culp said. "It's as if the gardener growing them has an especially green thumb."

And the price point doesn't have to be restrictive: You can get a nice bag of snowdrop bulbs for less than \$10.

There are a few hundred cultivars, but generally mail-order sources and local garden centers offer a handful of varieties.

Snowdrops are not fussy, and they are dependable year after year. Choose a spot with well-drained soil that gets about six hours of sun. Drainage is critical — low areas that collect water in

winter will cause the bulbs to rot. Plant the bulbs in groups of a dozen or so, placing each one about 3 inches deep and 3 inches apart. Over time, they will naturalize, producing drifts of flowers.

In Culp's garden, some of the plants drop seeds that produce new plants, which he can move around. If they like where they're planted, the bulbs will multiply slowly. You can also propagate the plants by dividing and replanting the clumps as soon as the plants finish flowering.

"You don't need them all; you just need the best," Culp said. He suggests that gardeners new to snowdrops look for varieties that are garden-worthy — those with a big flower and rounded shape. Although it's hard for him to choose among favorites, he likes *Galanthus* 'Oliver Wyatt,' 'Maidwell' and 'Bill Bishop.'

And there's something else to be said for these flowers.

"They really are no-care perennials," Kunst said. "There's a swath of snowdrops under a tree and shrubs in our neighbor's backyard, and every year it's bigger and more beautiful, even though they've never done anything to it in the 30 years we've lived here. We all need more plants like that."

Snowdrop sources

Chicago Botanic Garden

Bulb Festival, Oct. 5-6,

10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

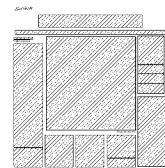
1000 Lake-Cook Road, Glencoe
847-835-5440

chicagobotanic.org

Many garden centers include snowdrops. Here are a few mail-order sources.

Old House Gardens

536 Third St.



Ann Arbor, MI 48103-4957

734-995-1486

oldhousegardens.com

Breck's

P.O. Box 65

Guilford, IN 47022-4180

513-354-1511

brecks.com

Brent and Becky's Bulbs

7900 Daffodil Lane

Gloucester, VA 23061

877-661-2852

brentandbeckysbulbs.com



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