

Wisley's Alpine Log

By Paul Cumbleton

Log 5 ... 26th February 2009



What a difference a couple of weeks makes! The milder temperatures have melted all the snow and brought out an abundance of spring bulbs. *Crocus tommasinianus* is everywhere such as here near the top of the rock garden:



Where it is happy, this *Crocus* is well known for easily spreading itself both by seed and by offsetting. Some would even call it invasive. Few of us would consider it a problem however unless it is swamping choicer species and it is one of the great delights that lifts spirits at the end of winter and into early spring. It is a very variable plant and if you have planted different named forms, you will soon find they cross and produce varied seedlings, so it can be hard to keep a named form pure for long unless kept in isolation. Many of the seedlings however can be as beautiful if not more so than their parents and may be worth picking out and propagating in their own right.

One place this species has invaded is the top of the alpine meadow where it is spreading rapidly. We didn't put it there; it has seeded in from nearby beds and is making a wonderful show right now as you can see in this next photo:



There are a variety of forms here. I particularly like the ones that have the petals tipped in a darker shade such as this:



Elsewhere on the meadow, the first of the *Narcissus bulbocodium* has opened, the promise of hopefully a big display to come in the next few weeks:



Although this species likes a moist position, the meadow has been exceptionally wet this winter, especially with the melting snow adding to the effects of previous heavy rain. Water has been sitting in pools on the surface in places. We hope this hasn't badly affected the bulbs and other plants. Longer term, we have plans to add some extra drainage systems to the meadow to try and deal with its poor drainage. This will have to be done thoughtfully as we don't want it to become so well drained that it no longer is moist enough for the *Narcissus*.

Leucojum vernum, the spring snowflake, has also become quite established on the meadow, obviously very much at home in the moist conditions. We have this in many locations around the department and it seems equally at home in sun or shade. This group is at the bottom of north-facing rocks near the top of the rock garden and where water seeps out from under the rocks, keeping the area constantly wet:



Inevitably we find ourselves pointing out to visitors that these plants are not snowdrops; it's surprising just how many people seem not to know *Leucojum* at all.

For those looking specifically for the snowdrops, these too have been in great form recently. There are masses of them all over Wisley, but especially so in the Wild Garden and around our own area of the rock garden. This grouping, mixed in among *Crocus tommasinianus* and *Cyclamen coum*, are in the topmost bed just below the display houses.



Snowdrops also seed themselves around and many patches appear that we have not planted. Visitors often ask us for the name of any such patches that happen to be looking especially good at the moment, and wonder why they are not labelled. We explain that they have seeded themselves there and so are unnamed seedlings. But we do of course have many that we *have* planted ourselves and are labelled. One that does well for us and makes large clumps is *Galanthus* 'Magnet':



There is a planting combination that seems to have become a classic which I have seen now in many gardens – planting snowdrops amongst *Ophiopogon* 'Nigrescens', where the white snowdrop flowers contrast wonderfully with the near-black leaves of the *Ophiopogon*. Here is one example:



The early flowering Irises have also been making a good show. This is the well-known and widely available 'George':



This patch is planted under an oak tree at the very top of the rock garden. We were not sure they would do well here because when in leaf the tree shades them. However, they have thrived here, spreading and multiplying freely. Another Iris that I have always liked since first planting it in a trough at home is *Iris histrioides* 'Angel's Tears'. At Wisley I've now planted just a few bulbs of this in the raised beds outside the alpine house and these are now flowering for the first time:



Moving indoors now, the display house is also full of bulbs right now. *Crocus* abound, such as this bright *Crocus x luteus* 'Stellaris':



More subtle in colour but no less attractive for it is this *Crocus vernus* ssp. *vernus* 'Neapolitanus'



Finally what could be better than the bluest of blues of this *Scilla caucasica* 'Indra'? Enjoy!

