

Galanthus nivalis

SNOWDROP is a bulbous perennial. Native to central and southern Europe, and to the Caucasus, it has small white flowers that are white and green inside.

It is also known as *Almindelig Vintergæk* (Danish), *Bouonnefemmes* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Bulbous violet, Candlemas bells, Candle mass lily, Common snowdrop, Death's flower, Dewdrops, Dingle bell, Dingle dangle, Drooping bell, Drooping heads, Drooping lily, *Eirlys* (Welsh), Eve's tears, Fair maid of February, Fair maids, February fair maids, *Galanthe des neiges* (French), *Galanto neĝa* (Esperanto), *Kleines Schneeglöckchen* (German), Little sister of the snows, Mary's taper, Naked maidens, *Neĝborulo* (Esperanto), *Perce-neige* (French), Pierce-snow, Purification flower, *Schneeglöckchen* (German), *Sneeuwkllokje* (Dutch), *Sněženka jarní* (Czech), *Sněženka podsněžník* (Czech), *Snežienka jarná* (Slovak), *Snödrotte* (Swedish), Snowbells, Snow droppers, Snow-piercer, True snowdrop, *Vanlig snödrotte* (Swedish), White bells, and White queen; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of chastity, consolation, death, 'friendship in adversity', hope, 'hope in sorrow', and purity.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous. It can cause vomiting, purging, severe gastroenteritis, and occasionally, convulsions.

Nivalis is Latin (snowy, of snow) meaning 'snow-white or growing near snow' with reference to the whiteness of the flower.

In Christian legend one story tells how after leaving the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve were desolated by Winter. An angel appreciates their distress and transforms drifting snowflakes into snowdrops to give them hope for the coming Spring. For Christians the snowdrop is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and several of the common names owe their existence to a practice that used to take place on Candlemas Day (2nd February). On the Feast of the Purification snowdrops were scattered in place of the image of the Virgin Mary which was temporarily removed from church altars.

The snowdrop has taken its place in literature. Mary Robinson (1758-1800), the English poet, novelist and Shakespearean actress who in 1779 became mistress to the future George IV wrote

The Snow-drop, Winter's timid child,
Awakes to life, bedew'd with tears.

Then the English peasant poet, John Clare (1793-1864), mentions the flower in his poem entitled *Death* – a poem he wrote in an asylum to which he had been committed in 1837.

..... the sun in its calm,
Her lips they were rubies, her bosom was warm,
And white as the snowdrop that lies on her breast;
Now death like a dream

A few decades earlier the Romantic English poet, Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) writes in a happier vein in *The Snowdrop*.

Like pendant flakes of vegetating snow,
The early herald of the infant year,
Ere yet the adventurous crocus dares to blow,
Beneath the orchard boughs thy buds appear.
While still the cold north-east ungenial lowers;

.....
The grass is spangled with thy silver drops.
.....

It is thought that the snowdrop was first introduced to Britain in the 1st Century by visiting Italian monks.

In England it attracted its share of superstition and custom, some of it connected with death, possibly because of the drooping flower's alleged suggestion of a corpse in a shroud. Traditionally in times gone by snowdrops were hung on family graves. None of the flowers could be brought in the house if chickens were reared as the hens would not hatch their eggs. The first snowdrop or a solitary flower brought over the threshold was an omen of death, particularly for the person who picked it. While no less 'serious' but on the lighter side any girl expecting to be married in the ensuing year was ill-advised to pick any snowdrops before 14th February (St. Valentine's Day) as this could be unlucky. Some still contend that snowdrops can only be lifted successfully and the clumps split if during this process the plant is assured that it is only being moved for its own good.

Today the snowdrop has played a significant part in drawing public attention in Britain to commercial and political interest in the application of genetic advances to plants, not least food crops. In the late 1990s journalists reported that a scientist had introduced a specific snowdrop gene into a potato plant (*Solanum tuberosum*) with according to the researcher concerned cautionary results for the food chain. This event made a significant contribution to the increased level of debate in the Country as a whole on all aspects of genetic modification of plants.

Snowdrops were also in the public eye for a completely different reason in the early months of the new Millenium. Plant conservation bodies were concerned about the possibility of a growing trade in illegally obtained plants and the collection of wild plants on a large scale as this could severely damage the habitat of the area from which they are taken. In England it seems there were two independent and successful Court cases (in Thetford in Norfolk and St. Albans in Hertfordshire) brought against men who had dug up quantities of snowdrops illegally - the former involved 18 crates of the very small bulbs, and the latter 300,000 of these bulbs from conservation areas. The interest in these cases among many relevant authorities is explained not only by the fact that they were in quick succession (and in the previous 25 years only 14 convictions had been secured) but also that the latter case had been tried under the Country's Theft Act and this had enabled a custodial sentence to be handed down whereas the Wildlife and Countryside Act commands a maximum sentence in the form of a fine of then currently £2,500.

Medicinally, until recent European research little notice has been taken of the plant in herbals apart from its use in helping to heal frostbite, as a dressing for wounds, or as an emetic. Now however eastern Europe has been promoting a substance relying on the properties in the snowdrop which it is believed can stimulate regeneration of some nerve cells eg. could be of benefit in such diseases as poliomyelitis.

It is the birthday flower for 20th January and the flower is also associated with the whole month of January.