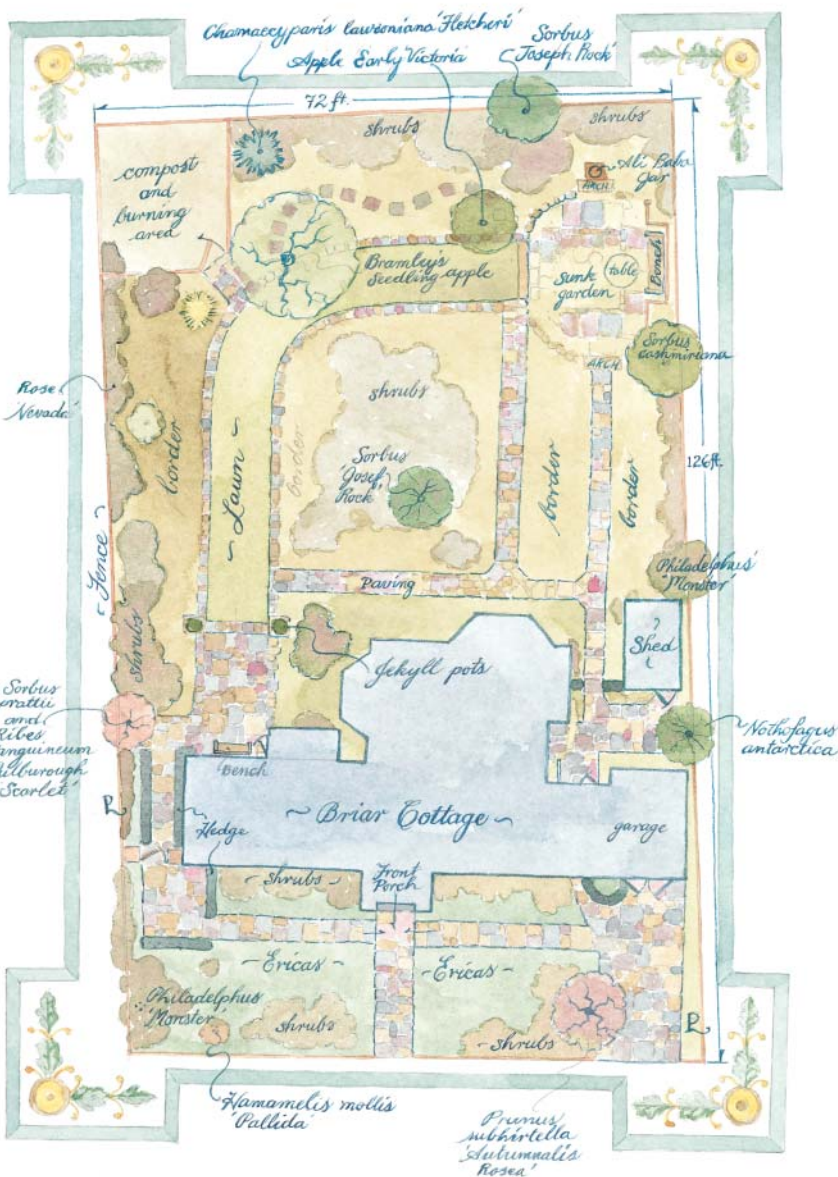


FIRST FLOWERS

A master plantsman's picks for late-winter garden interest. Graham Stuart Thomas



An overview of the author's garden. The front beds are devoted largely to winter flowering plants.

WHEN FEBRUARY BEGINS the sun is gaining a little of the strength it had in November, and signs of the turning year are evident in the byways and the hedgerows, where the pussy willows are beginning to glint. Perhaps the best, other than a good male form of *Salix caprea*, is *S. medemii*. The yellow catkins of the hazel loosely dangle, and if you look hard you may discover the tiny, bright-red female flowers. A tree that is unaccountably neglected in spite of its early display is the maple *Acer opulus*, whose greeny-yellow tassels imitate those of the well-known Norway maple, *Acer platanoides*, two or three weeks later. They both make large trees and excel in autumn color.

TREES

If you have some damp ground in your garden, try the **yellow-leaved alder**, *Alnus incana 'Aurea'* (USDA Zone 2). When the twigs and stems of this tree are seen in bright light they are astonishing: the combinations of yellow and orange—even red—of the bark and catkins make a rich assortment.

February generally sees early color from the **cherry plum**, *Prunus cerasifera* (Zone 4). It is the green-leaved form of more commonly seen purple-leaved plums. I personally am not quite ready for the pink forms, which really belong to March, and the cloud of tiny, creamy-white flowers is just right for the awakening year. These trees light the garden landscape in a wonderful way after the weeks of winter. Very often, too, the last display from the autumn-blooming *Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis'* (Zone 4) will be in evidence. And there is an early-flowering form of the Fuji cherry, *P. incisa 'Praecox'* (Zone 5), that will add to the array of earliest trees.

SHRUBS

Shrubs are on the move too, and seldom a February goes by without my visiting a garden where there is a large bush of the **Cornelian cherry dogwood**, *Cornus mas*

(Zone 4), with every twig ending in a tuft of tiny yellow, strangely scented flowers. There are special forms that give a good crop of red berries in August, useful in the kitchen. And as if this is not enough, the shrub also gives us coppery autumn color.

On lime-free soils we can glory in the earliest **rhododendrons**. *Rhododendron dauricum* (Zone 4) has been on display in January, but *R. mucronulatum* and its clear-white variety 'Album' usually open in mild spells of February followed by that old-timer *R. 'Praecox'*, generally a smother of lilac-pink blossom and dense leafy growth. All these rhododendrons have delicious aromatic twigs and leaves; it is remarkable the amount of fragrance that flows out from a bruised bush. Alongside these shrubs, also in lime-free soils, we can place the early pierises, or **andromedas**. These ever-green shrubs bear their small white bells attractively from all the strong twigs. *Pieris japonica* (Zone 5) is one of the earliest, with a honey scent; in the form 'Jermyns' the white flowers are held in long drooping clusters and are burnished with darker tints. I have not found it quite so hardy as the species itself.

Among the smaller shrubs there is the British native **daphne**, *Daphne mezereum* (Zone 4), which grows to four feet and whose erect twigs are studded with small, deliciously-scented, four-petaled blooms usually of a pink or plum color. There is a superb white known as 'Bowles' White'.

I do not think that a garden, unless very small, is complete without **Japanese mahonia**, *Mahonia japonica* (Zone 6). It is a noble foliage shrub, and this alone should earn it a place—in sun if you want burnished foliage or in shade if you prefer normal green. But apart from its leaves it blesses us with a long (three months) display of little creamy-yellow bells on drooping sprays with a pronounced smell of lily of the valley.

And then there are the **winter-flowering heaths**. *Erica carnea* (Zone 5) is the king of the lot and will

thrive in neutral soils as well as acid ones. No plant in the winter months goes on so unperturbably in cloud and sunshine, rain, frost, and snow. 'Springwood' (pink) and 'Springwood White' are two of the most valuable color forms, with 'Myretoun Ruby' a rich dark color. And carrying on until April is the yet darker and more compact 'Vivellii'. I have noticed in municipal and garden planting near my home that, wonderful as these plants are, they are not as resistant to drought as the hybrid *E. ×darleyensis* (Zone 6). This starts flowering sometimes even before Christmas, and carries on well into April with the *E. carnea* varieties. A fine form of *×darleyensis* is 'Arthur Johnson', with flowers a little more rosy than the usual lilac-pink; it also has longer spikes. They will rise as high as three feet. 'Arthur Johnson' originated as a self-sown seedling in its namesake's lovely garden in North Wales. There is also a good creamy white, 'White Perfection'; this I find a much better plant than 'Siblerschmelze'. Though a good grower and flowerer, 'Siblerschmelze' has flowers of a rather grayish white, which can look dirty on a dull day. There is no doubt that these heaths form the mainstay of low-growing flowering plants for winter and earliest spring; their pinks, mauves, crimsons, and whites go on week after week. The one danger is that in our thirst for color early in the year we shall be tempted to grow with them some of the callunas with bright foliage. My advice is not to do this: the colors will clash horribly; the reds and oranges and yellows of the callunas (ling or heather) are not the tints to associate with the ericas. It is a terrible temptation to make just this mixture when confronted with all the varieties in a garden center. Stand firm and give the two categories of colors separate places!

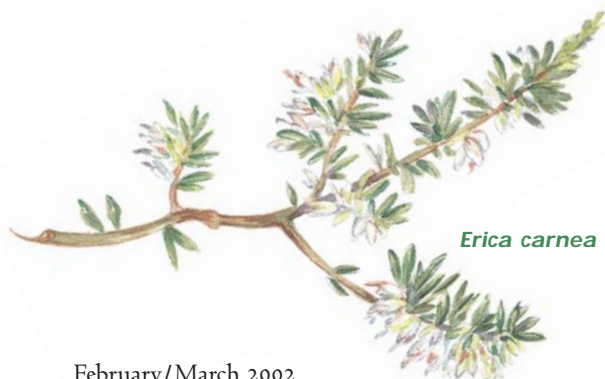
PERENNIALS

If your garden is on a stiff, limy soil you may be fortunate enough to grow and flower the **Christmas rose hellebore**, *Helleborus niger* (Zone 3). It is not a success in my acid, sandy soil, though the **Lenten rose**, *H. orientalis*,



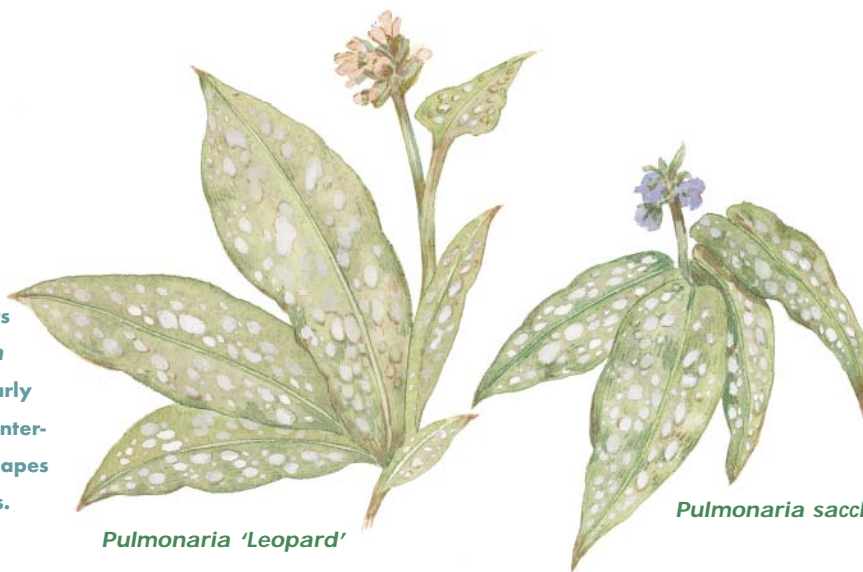
Daphne mezereum

The modest size of *Daphne mezereum* and *Erica carnea* makes them ideal for smaller gardens. Both are among the earliest plants to bloom at the end of winter. In addition, the flowers of the daphne are heavily and delightfully fragrant.



Erica carnea

The lungworts (*Pulmonaria* spp.) offer early flowers and interesting leaf shapes and spottings.



Pulmonaria 'Leopard'



Pulmonaria saccharata



Pulmonaria longifolia

Yellow and Red Star



Helleborus 'Queen of the Night'

Hellebores produce some of the earliest and most sumptuous flowers of the late-winter garden. They have handsome, almost sculptural leaves, and the plants thrive in shade or sun.

and its kin (Zone 3) are very much at home. Before these are at their best, the British native *H. foetidus* (Zone 3) will be pushing up its tall, pale-green stalks over a podium of dark green leaves. Apart from those of the Christmas rose and *Euphorbia robbiae* (Zone 8), I know of no darker leaves. They are a wonderful contrast with other greens through the year. But to return to *H. foetidus*, every pale stalk branches, and each bears a nodding bell of the same vernal hue, often rimmed with murrey. They are loved by bumblebees, which go about their business early in the year. *Helleborus corsicus* (Zone 6) is a much grander plant in a symphony of greens. Both of these species take two years to make a flowering stem and are thus semishrubby.

Although the sun in the early year is not strong enough to spoil the flowers of the hellebores, I should always give them the benefit of shady places, whether from walls, trees, or shrubs. They do not object to rooty soils and seem to thrive in every medium, but the richer the better for them. You can have flowers of deep mulberry-red, rose-pink, and several allied tones; or they may be white or palest pink and all

more or less spotted around the central floral parts. Sometimes the spotting becomes a mass of rich color, giving the flowers an intense dark eye. Some vary to primrose and even darker yellow. They are all prodigal flowerers and give almost as long a display as the ericas. In fact the two groups together can give a brilliance of display to equal many of the year's best. And they are weather- and frost-proof. On some soils the hellebore foliage suffers from leaf spot, and it is wise to clear away faded leaves in autumn and winter. Their flowering period is long, extending into April.

There is one notable perennial that is awake early in the year, and that is the **pulmonaria**, otherwise known as spotted dog, lungwort, and soldiers and sailors. The last sobriquet will not do for the earliest to flower, *P. rubra* (Zone 3), whose flowers are wholly dark pink or red with leaves that are wholly green as a rule, whereas *P. picta* (*P. saccharata*, Zone 3) and *P. vulgaris* (Zone 4) have leaves spotted with gray-white and flowers pink in bud turning to blue. All members of this group are lovely when there is little else in flower, but beware: they are errant seeders and have a knack of coming up near something precious and smothering it with coarse leafage. For all that, I should not like to be totally without them; their leaf patterns alone make them attractive from spring onward, and there are some good blue-flowered forms about, light and dark, and some whites. It is when one gets a seedling with wholly gray leaves and good blue flowers that their attraction is fully realized. ♡