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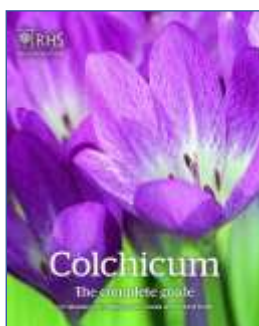
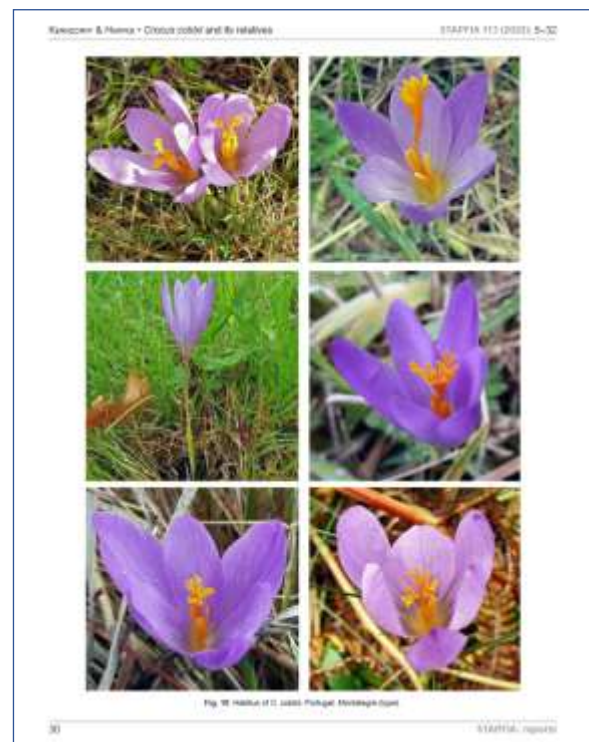
In IRG this month, Wim Boens from Belgium, brings details of various new *Crocus tommasinianus* varieties, named by himself or his friends. Wim is much involved with VRV ([Vlaamse Rotsplanten Vereniging](http://www.vrv.be)), the Flemish Rock Garden Association, and is Seed exchange manager for the Crocus Group - and much more besides, but space is limited! Wim has written for IRG on several occasions and his articles are always well-received, as are

his talks, either in person or by Zoom, which gained popularity during the Corona Virus pandemic and look set to continue in future to some extent. The internet hosted talks have proved such a fine way to bring like-minded folk together from around the world with some degree of simplicity.

Robert Rolfe, author and plantsman par excellence is also known for spectacular spoken presentations, drawing on his encyclopaedic knowledge and astonishing memory. All this on top of his former "day job" in Nottingham and a remarkable ability to travel the world by public transport.

Robert writes about the late Ray Cobb, plantsman and crocus expert who has had several plants named for him, perhaps most notably, *Crocus cobbii*, from the northwestern part of the Iberian Peninsula, named in his honour in 2022 by Kerndorff, Pasche and Harpke.

Right: Images of the crocus named for Ray from the [Open Access paper on Sciendo](https://doi.org/10.2478/stapfia-2022-0001): Kerndorff, Helmut and Harpke, "*Crocus cobbii* Kerndorff, Pasche & Harpke species nova (Liliiflorae, Iridaceae) and its relatives" STAPFIA, vol.113, no.1, 3922, pp.5-32. <https://doi.org/10.2478/stapfia-2022-0001>



In 2020 Robert contributed to the RHS Media publication, **Colchicums – the Complete Guide** along with Christopher Grey- Wilson and Rod Leeds.

Cover image: *Crocus tommasinianus* (claret form), from a slide taken in Ray Cobb's garden in March 1984 by Robert Rolfe.

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--- Crocus Cultivars --

Early Crocuses in all colours, some interesting newly named cultivars

by Wim Boens.

Crocus tommasinianus, the early crocus or “tommie” is one of the best known and most widely grown spring flowering crocuses in our gardens. They multiply and naturalise very quickly by sowing and as such they produce a wide range of colourful forms, often hybridizing with other species like *Crocus vernus* and *C. neapolitanus*. It's easy to recognise the tommie by its mostly white floral tube, the style, which is almost the same length as the stamens, the tepals that are not as broad as in other crocuses and the flower that opens completely, taking on a star-like appearance on dry and sunny spring days.

In 1847 this species was described by the British botanist William Herbert, who named it for the person who discovered this species on Biokovo mountain in Dalmatia (Croatia) and who sent him some plants, professor Muzio Giuseppe Spirito de Tommasini. The area of distribution in the wild is of course a lot bigger than just that mountain and includes a big part of the Balkan, namely Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Northern-Macedonia, the northwest of Bulgaria and the south of Hungary. *C. tommasinianus* grows there in open places, under deciduous trees and in lightly shaded areas higher up in the mountains (between 1000-1500 metres), on calcareous soil.

In our gardens, this marvellous crocus flowers between February and May. This species is easy both in an open sunny spot and in the shade and is perfect for naturalization in the lawn and in the borders. In general, this is one of the easiest species for the garden, and that's exactly the reason why it's so frequently planted. *C. tommasinianus* can withstand both dry and wet summers and is very frost-resistant, only voles can be a problem. A lot of very good cultivars are frequently found in the trade, for example: 'Ruby Giant', 'Lilac Beauty', 'Whitewell Purple', 'Eric Smith', 'Yalta' (a hybrid with *C. x cultorum*), 'Barr's Purple', 'Roseus', 'Bobbo', 'Pictus', etc.



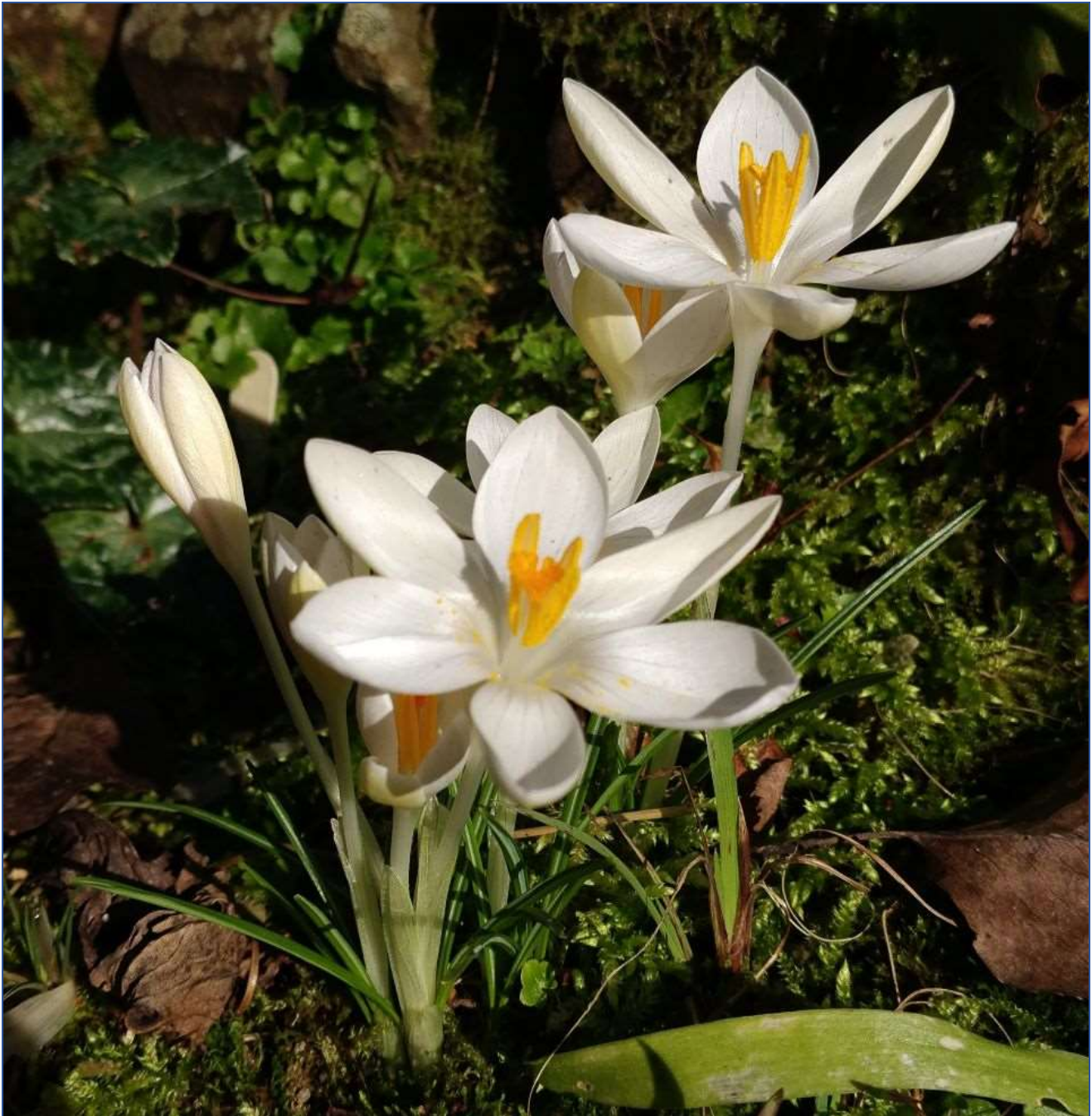
Left: white tipped crocus from J. G. later named 'Peter Grimshaw'- photo Jānis Rukšāns.



Right: 'Bobbo' – photo Wim Boens.

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In the last couple of years quite a few new and exciting selections have been named as well, mostly by keen gardeners who found spontaneous seedlings in their garden, here you'll find a small overview of some of those new cultivars.



***Crocus tommasinianus* 'Cream Tease'** Photos Jo Hynes.

This form emerged in the garden of Jo Hynes in Devon, England. The name is a play-on-words on the "Devon cream tea", an afternoon-tea of tea, scones, clotted cream and jam. The yellow of the scones and clotted cream and the purple of the jam can be found in the flower. This temptress of a flower belongs in every garden.

From a distance it does seem similar to the cultivar 'Eostre's Egg' (see below) but the outside of the inner tepals has purple spots.

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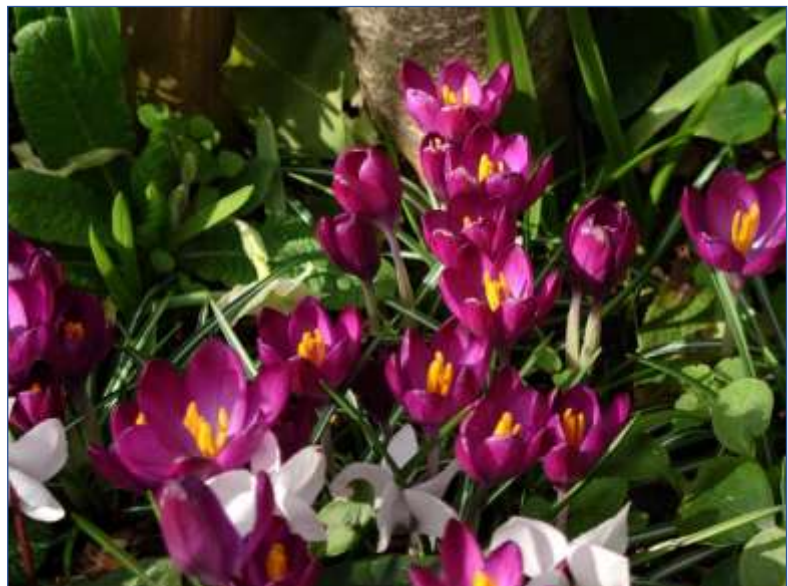
The outside of the three outer tepals is pale yellow, while the inside is plain white. The three inner tepals are white on the inside as well but the outside is sprinkled with purple spots.

Crocus tommasinianus
'Cream Tease'

Crocus tommasinianus 'Deano' Photos Dean Croucher.

In 2015 Dean Croucher from England found this *Crocus* growing in the lawn of a friend of his and the intensity of the colour popped up immediately. By now, he has a beautiful group of it in his garden.

On social media this form was immediately liked by a lot of Croconuts. Dr John Lonsdale jokingly christened this form as 'Deano' for its finder and the name stuck, especially since Dean's father was called Bob and now, he can grow 'Bobbo' and



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'Deano' side by side. At first glance, this *Crocus* seems to be similar to 'Mousse de Framboise' (see below) but in this cultivar, the flowers are completely coloured in the same intense pink-purple with no difference between the inner and outer tepals. Only the tips of the tepals can be a bit darker. The colour is richer and deeper than the colour of the older cultivar 'Claret'. Flowers a bit later than the average tommie end comes back true from seed.

C. tommasinianus
'Deano'



Crocus tommasinianus 'Eostre's Egg' Photos Mark Smyth.

This beautiful; yellow flowered tommasinianus was found by Mark Smyth in his garden in northern-Ireland and named by him as 'Eostre's Egg' in 2017. The name Eostre originates with a presumably West-Germanic goddess, In Old High German, the named of this (possibly non-existent) goddess was Ostara. Her name is etymologically related to 'Easter' and 'Ostern', which were the respective names for the Germanic spring-festivals in English and German.

A more recent folktale talks about the hare, which was originally a bird, but who was transformed into the animal we know now by the goddess Ostara, retaining its ability to lay eggs, and who still does it around the period of Easter to honour this goddess.



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The name is thus a perfect combination of these folktales.

The outer tepals of this form are beautifully shiny light yellow on the outside and on the inside the yellow shines through. The inner tepals are a clear, shiny white. This colour combination makes for a unique Spring-colour-palette.



Crocus tommasinianus 'Eostre's Egg'

Crocus tommasinianus 'Farndale Purple' Photos Wim Boens.

This plant was sent to me by Allan Robinson from England, it was planted by his father somewhere in the 1950s. Allan suspected this form could be the true 'Barr's Purple', but that is certainly not the case, since that cultivar has a much paler throat. The other "purples" are all completely different from this form. So, we decided it was worthy of its own name, and Allan named it 'Farndale Purple' to follow in the tradition of other purple-coloured tommies.



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The name of Allan's house is "Farndale" and his small nursery is "Farndale Plants". The name of the boat on which his father was stationed during WWII was the HMS Farndale, hence the name. This boat was a "Hunt-class", and the boats of this class were named for different foxhunts in the UK. The Farndale hunt was a foxhunt in Yorkshire. This illustrates the beautiful history of the name of this plant.

Both the inner and outer tepals of this cultivar are intensely purple coloured, of the deepest purple I've ever seen in any *C. tommasinianus*, with only the bottom half centimetre of the tepals being white coloured. Increases well and flowers a bit later than most other tommies.



Crocus tommasinianus 'Farndale Purple'

Crocus 'Foursquare' Photos Matt Bishop.

This *C. tommasinianus* x *C. vernus* hybrid, originating with John Grimshaw, was selected out of a group of *C. tommasinianus* 'Pieta'. 'Foursquare' was found between regular "Pietas" during a trial in the Wisley garden. The colour of this form is similar to 'Pieta' but a mature bulb gives flowers with 4 inner and 4 outer tepals in contrast to the regular 3, hence the name. The four outer tepals of this cultivar are almost pure white, with a pale-yellow glow on the outside. On the inside of the outer tepals a few pale lilac-coloured stripes can be seen.

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The four inner tepals are striped in lilac on a white background, both on the inside and the outside. Since this cultivar has more tepals, the flowers seem to be bigger and more filled, which makes it a worthy addition to any garden.



Crocus 'Foursquare'

Crocus 'Fridtjof' Photos Wim Boens.

I received a corm of this crocus in the summer of 2021 from Anne Repnow in Germany, who found it growing as a spontaneous seedling in her Crocus lawn in between these other crocuses: *C. sublimis* 'Tricolor', *C. chrysanthus*, *C. etruscus*, *C. heuffelianus*, *C. sieberi* and *C. tommasinianus*. Clearly one of the parents is the early Crocus, an educated guess would make me say the other parent plant is *Crocus chrysanthus*.



This white flowering form with violet-coloured veins was named in 2023 by Anne in honour of Fridtjof Nansen, whose humanitarian work she admires. He was a zoologist (just like Anne) and a polar explorer. With a bit of imagination this white form with blue veins reminds us of pack-ice.

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In bud, this form is white with a light sheen of pale purple, caused by the violet-coloured veins shining through the white tepals. Both the inner and outer tepals are intensely violet marbled on the inside, which gives this form an elegant presence. This cultivar is somewhat similar to Allan Robinson's 'Wendy Marr' (see below) but in 'Fridtjof', the outer tepals are broader and less elongated and the tepals are more intensely marbled.

Crocus 'Fridtjof'

Crocus tommasinianus 'Hörup' Photos Wim Boens.

In 2021 I received a corm of this wonderful form from Rita Thomsen, who found it as a seedling in her garden and kept it under the name *C. tommasinianus*, yellowish/beige. After some people had seen this form both in bud and with opened flower in my garden, many said it was really one of the best tommies they had ever seen.



That's why I asked Rita in the Spring of 2023 to come up with a name for this form and she decided to name it for the northern German village where she lives, as *C. tommasinianus* 'Hörup'.

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The outer tepals of this form are pale yellow on the outside and they seem to shine by themselves in the garden. On the inside they are very pale lilac coloured. The inner tepals are completely pale lilac with some darker purple stripes on the inside. The big bright orange stigma and yellow stamens contrast nicely with the flower. Quick to increase and completely different from any of the other tommies.

Crocus tommasinianus 'Leo'

Photos Wim Boens .

Years ago, Dr John Grimshaw received this form from the well-known English cartoonist Leo Baxendale, who had found it as a spontaneous seedling in his garden. When [Leo](#) passed away in 2017, John decided to name this Crocus in his honour.



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Left, *C. tommasinianus* 'Leo' – in bud in the shade.

Crocus 'Leo' in the sun –
showing the dark outers.
Photo Ruben Billiet.



This form has been called 'deep tan coloured' in bud because of the colour of the outside of the tepals. The rest of the flower, meaning the inside of the outer tepals and both the inner and outside of the inner tepals is bright pink coloured, what comes as a real surprise when you've only seen the plant in bud, since there's only a hint of purple at the bottom of the outer tepals. This makes it a truly unique cultivar.



Crocus tommasinianus **'Mousse de Framboise'**

Photos Ruben Billiet.

Somewhere in the beginning of the 2020s, this seedling was discovered in the garden of Ruben Billiet. In 2022 Ruben named it as such based on the name I suggested. It's named for the colour of the flowers of course, which reminded me of raspberry mousse topped with raspberry coulis.

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In this cultivar, the outer tepals are an intense bright pink (just like a raspberry coulis) which catches your eye immediately. The colour is the brightest at the tips of the tepals and a bit paler at the bottom. The inner tepals are paler coloured but still a bright pink/red (like the colour of a raspberry mousse). It's a wonderful, eye-catching cultivar that introduces the brightest summer colours into the spring garden.



Crocus tommasinianus 'Mousse de Framboises'



Crocus tommasinianus 'Myddelton Red' Photo John Grimshaw.

Reddish flowering form, found and named by John Grimshaw. He found this intensely coloured cultivar a few years back in the garden of E.A. Bowles and named it for his famous garden house, [Myddelton House](#).

The inner and outer tepals of this cultivar are similarly coloured with the outers being just a bit darker. The tepals are completely pink with darker, intense fuchsia pink coloured tips.

Crocus tommasinianus 'Peter Grimshaw' Photos Jānis Rukšāns.

This stunning cultivar has been sold for a couple of years by Latvian plantsman, Jānis



Rukšāns as *C. tommasinianus*, white pointed, and he considers it one of the best he's ever seen. This *Crocus* originates from the parental home of John Grimshaw, the director of the Yorkshire arboretum in England, so John decided to name it for his father, Peter Grimshaw, in 2023.

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The outer tepals of this form are white/pale purple. At the top of these outers, there's a dark purple stain in the shape of a stylised flying bird with a pure white tip at the tepals. The inside of the outer tepals is completely pale purple with a darker purple tip. This pattern is repeated on the inner tepals but without the pure white tip at the outside and without the white sheen on the outer surface. A striking a unique form for the garden.

Left, C. 'Peter Grimshaw' Photo Wim Boens.

Below, C. 'Peter Grimshaw' Photo Jānis Rukšāns.



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Crocus tommasinianus 'Pieta' Photos Wim Boens.

This beautiful tommie was found somewhere in a naturalized population in the Oxford region by John Grimshaw. The marbling of this form reminded John of Michelangelo's Pietà in Saint-Peter's Basilica in Rome (right) hence the name.

In bud, this form is pale yellow but once opened it reveals its true beauty. The outside of the outer tepals is creamy yellow. The inside of the outer tepals can have a few purple veins and both the inside and the outside of the inner tepals is intensely violet-marbled. The contrast with the bright orange pistil and the yellow/orange stamens makes this a true eyecatcher in the Spring garden.



Crocus tommasinianus 'Pieta'

Crocus tommasinianus 'Pixel' Photos Wim Boens.

Seedling from the garden of Mariette Timmermann in Germany. In 2019, on a sunny Saturday-afternoon, I went to visit the garden of this botanically inclined lady. One of the nice surprises in her garden was a tapestry of Crocus seedlings. I knew the tommie 'Eric Smith', which can have a few purple spots on the tepals, but this seedling, which caught my eye

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immediately is a true spotted monster. After a couple of years, this seedling formed a beautiful group in my garden and Mariette named it in 2023 for one of her favourite deceased cats, as 'Pixel'.



The outer tepals are plain white on the outside, but the spotted inside does shine through to the outside. This creates the illusion of a completely freckled flower when it's fully opened. The inner tepals are entirely freckled on both sides, with irregularly shaped, purple spots, arranged in a feather-like pattern, which do not bleed into each other. Always one of the first tommies to flower in my garden.



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Crocus 'Silver Lining' Photo John Grimshaw.

This tommie-hybrid was selected by John Grimshaw in Colesbourne Park, when he was the manager there. This beautiful white/purple cultivar was later spread by Matt Bishop under the cultivar name 'Silver Lining'.

Both the inner and outer tepals of this form have a white background with beautiful violet coloured veining. On the inner tepals only the veins (up until the smallest veins) are coloured, on the outer tepals the colour bleeds out from the veins giving them a more completely violet coloured look with some "silver lines" of the background peeking through.

[John Grimshaw is now the Director at [The Yorkshire Arboretum](http://www.yorkshirearboretum.co.uk).]



Crocus 'Silver Lining' Photo Jon Evans.

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Crocus tommasinianus 'St. Sepulchre's Pale' Photo Wim Boens.

Another selection by John Grimshaw. Found in the same population as the previously mentioned 'Pieta' but completely white on the outside. Since it originates from the same population, it deserved a Christian name as well. After the compassion (Pieta) comes the Holy Sepulchre.

In bud, this form is pure white, but once opened it shows its true beauty. The outer tepals are pure white coloured. The inner tepals are violet feathered, both on the outside and the inside.



Crocus tommasinianus 'Topsy'

Photos Wim Boens.

Seedling from the garden of Allan Robinson, who named it as such. The name is a play on words, the tips of the tepals have a different colour and of course it's also an allusion to being "tipsy".



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The outer tepals of 'Topsy' are pale purple with darker tips, this is repeated on the inner tepals but the general colour is a bit darker than on the outers. The dark tips of this plant make it a wonderful plant for the garden. In my garden, it's always one of the later flowering tommies. Quite quick to increase.

Crocus 'Wandering Minstrel' Photos Wim Boens.

Named by John Grimshaw. The name comes from the song "The Mikado" by Gilbert and Sullivan ("...a wandering minstrel I, a thing of shreds and patches..."). He selected this from a mixed population of *C. tommasinianus* / *C. vernus* on a cemetery in Oxford in 1989. When people see this "wandering minstrel" for the first time, it often stirs their emotions. Some people fall in love at first sight and others think it looks virused. Although the shape of the flower is perfect, I had it tested to be sure and the lab-results came back negative for virus on this form. Which means it is a stable genetic mutation, more correctly: the spots on the outer tepals are caused by a transposable element, like in many "spotted" flowers.

The inner tepals of this wonderful cultivar, are plain lilac coloured and the outer tepals have the same lilac base colour but splattered with darker spots. It is a strong, garden-worthy cultivar, just like most *vernus* and *tommasinianus* forms, but it's not as quick to increase. This exquisite form is perfect for people who want a real eye-catching Crocus in the garden.

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Crocus 'Wandering Minstrel'

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Crocus 'Wendy Marr' Photos Wim Boens.

A Crocus hybrid (cross between *C. vernus* and *C. tommasinianus*), named by Allan Robinson, in honour of the wife of Dr John Marr. Presented to John by Allan in 2017, as a present for his 90th birthday.



In bud it looks like a plain pale purple/almost white flower, but once the flower opens, its true beauty is revealed. The inner tepals are violet veined, both on the in- and outside. The inside of the outer tepals is slightly feathered in the same colour. A wonderful new form, quick to increase in the open garden! A bit similar to Anne Repnow's 'Fridtjof' (see above) but with less blue on the outer tepals and the outers are thinner and longer in this cultivar.



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In conclusion:

In the previously described forms quite a few similar forms can be found, but they are all sufficiently different to warrant their own cultivar name, here below I've listed them according to their colour group:

White, violet veined: 'Fridtjof', 'Pieta', 'Silver Lining', 'St. Sepulchre's Pale', 'Wendy Marr'.

Eight tepals: 'Foursquare'.

Yellowish on the outside: 'Cream Tease', 'Eostre's Egg', 'Hörup', 'Leo'.

Lilac spots: 'Pixel'.

Intense pinkish-red: 'Deano', 'Mousse de Framboise', 'Myddelton Red'.

Spotted outer tepals: 'Wandering Minstrel'.

Purple, white tips: 'Peter Grimshaw'.

Plain purple: 'Farndale Purple'.

Purple, dark tips: 'Topsy'.

Thanks to:

With thanks to the following people for the description of their newly named cultivars: Ruben Billiet, Dean Croucher, Dr John Grimshaw, Anne Repnow, Allan Robinson, Mark Smyth, Rita Thomsen and Mariette Timmermann.

CROCUS ENTHUSIASTS: are you aware that there is a group specifically for YOU! The CROCUS GROUP has a seed distribution service. You become a member by contacting the secretary [Tony Goode](#). You can partake in the seed exchange, which only charges for the packaging and sending, around 7€ for 20 packages of seeds. Tony Goode operates the seedex for the UK and [Wim Boens](#) arranges the seedex for the EU and the rest of the world (except Australia). Australia now has a separate seedex as well, with [Mat Murray](#) at the helm. The Australian group has a seed exchange, plant sale, monthly newsletter & bi-annual journal, The Crocus Focus. Send an email to [Helen Batty](#) and indicate you wish to join the group. Membership is included when you join the [Alpine Garden Society \(Victoria\)](#).

The re-vamped edition of Tony Goode's Crocus Pages, may be found [here](#).

You can find most of the archive of Crocus Group newsletters [here](#).



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--- Memories of a Plantsman ---



Ray and Sylvia Cobb. Photographer Annette Sivers.

Ray Cobb and a few of his plants: one man's perspective – text and photos by Robert Rolfe.

Resolute harvesters turned up, wielding trowels and sturdy spades (no rain had fallen for a month) on two Saturdays in June. Many of Ray Cobbs' plants now have new owners. He died, not far short of his 101st birthday, on April 23rd this year. I was away at the time of the 'digathons' but due to the kindness of his family have since received a potful of *Galanthus reginae-olgae* subsp. *vernalis*, attributed to one of John Blanchard's Pyrenean visits, albeit far to the west of that taxon's accepted geographical range. This I went round to collect in early July – my last trip to 'Aurelia' (his Bramcote garden, within walking distance of Elizabethan Wollaton Hall, on the outskirts of Nottingham). My first, as a schoolboy, was in February 1971. Despite the wholesale removals, there was still much to enjoy. While primarily associated with hardy bulbs – crocuses and snowdrops especially – Ray had a much broader range of horticultural enthusiasms.

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Galanthus reginae olgae var. vernalis

The local soil – neutral sand – suited various smaller rhododendrons that have made fine plants, as have several *Paeonia* species; hefty clumps one hopes can be divided in the autumn and distributed. *P. daurica* subsp. *mlkosewitschii* is one such, and he also raised what was only quite recently (2014) described as *P. wendelboi* from Erich Pasche's seed, growing it outdoors, at the foot of a tall pine. In effect a dwarf doppelganger, it has proved interfertile at Gothenburg, the hybrid issue provisionally dubbed *P. x. mlkoboii*.

The small front garden was at its most colourful in February – *Galanthus* time, when plentiful *Cyclamen coum* kept the snowdrops company in abundance. Seeding around more sparingly, a vigorous, mid pink form of *Primula vulgaris* subsp. *sibthorpii* looked as if it might have enjoyed a dalliance with a Polyanthus; in truth these were 'pure' representatives, derived from NE Turkish seed received in the mid-1980s. To the right of the door, I noted a still flourishing clump of *Iris unguicularis* 'Mary Barnard' (the first plant he ever gave me). Surely the most reliable, most floriferous clone grown presently, the flowers hold their heads proud even in bad weather, whereas several other selections are weak of stem and splay badly.



Primula vulgaris subsp. *sibthorpii*

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Iris unguicularis 'Mary Barnard'

Come July, several dieramas sashayed in the warm breeze, and the pokers of fellow South African *Kniphofia* injected what NewSpeak, modish designers term 'vertical accents'.

Turning left, then down the narrow passage between house and neighbouring fence, I made my way to the back garden, much longer than wide and criss-crossed by a maze of narrow, flagstone paths. I doubt it would win plaudits from any guild of just mentioned designers, yet it was at times enchanting, mainly from late winter to April. In later years Ray found access to the furthest extremes difficult. Fortunately, once-a-week garden helper Kathryn took charge here. (He first vetted her by selecting several pearlwort-infested pot plants, presenting a pair of tweezers and enquiring: 'How best to tackle these?') She was also inculcated in his rather complex labelling system. This I never fathomed, beyond recognising that a red label denoted the plant was seed-raised and rare.

Son-in-law Mike Sivers devised a multi-layered spread sheet, based on extant markers and consultations but despite best efforts, a few plants could not be identified conclusively. As evidence, consider a handsome snowdrop with broad, glaucous leaves. It looks akin to *Galanthus elwesii* 'Marjorie Brown', but this identification has been queried. That's snowdrops for you, if their labels have come adrift.

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Galanthus elwesii cf. 'Marjorie Brown'

Crocus species were his out and out favourites and as National Collection Holder for almost 30 years, from 1978-2007, he dedicated a great deal of time to their study and cultivation. Some of the rarer ones were kept in an alpine house, where autumnal *C. wattiorum* was a great success. Others he kept potted in cold frames, the most recent model cleverly designed to be mouse proof, or else planted out in the borders and informal trial beds.

Several vernal crocuses I particularly associate with him. The first, a luminously reddish-purple form of *C. tommasinianus*, was handed on by Oliver Wyatt and further distributed as 'Claret' (Ray was a connoisseur of French wines, perhaps influencing the naming). I include an image taken from a print dating back to March 1984 to demonstrate that the original version had pointed, non-overlapping perianth segments, whereas some recent examples bearing the same identity are more rounded and, to some eyes, an improvement. I suggest that the designation Claret Group is best employed to accommodate such minor variants. (Every spring, Ray would conduct a determined but ultimately forlorn campaign to rid the garden of bog-standard *C. tommasinianus* weedlings, sparing only the best, these including a notable albino, taller yet less buxom than 'Eric Smith'.)

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Crocus tommasinianus Claret Group, photographed in March 2017.



Crocus tommasinianus (claret form), from a slide taken at 'Aurelia' in March 1984.

'Claret'/Claret Group undoubtedly has its origins with E.A. Bowles, who remarked on 'a glowing amethyst-purple that in some seedlings approaches nearer to crimson than I have seen in any other *Crocus*'. (*A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicum for Gardeners*, special edition 1955, p. 76.) Bowles was also irrefutably the man who handed Ray a pale yellow, atypical *C. weldenii*, at first distributed as a sulphur form of that *never yellow* species. Of unresolved hybrid origin, he gave it the sobriquet 'Myddleton Cream', referencing the home of Bowles at Bulls

Cross, Enfield. It has endured – but in all too few hands.

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Crocus 'Ronald Ginns'

C. 'Ronald Ginns' (Ray's own creation, painstakingly engineered from Cretan *C. sieberi* cross-pollinated with *C. sublimis* 'Tricolor') has been catalogued several times of late, having been welcome mass produced in the Netherlands. It was one of ten seedlings, of which he selected six. His favourite, no. 1, was stolen; this runner-up was no. 3. At its peak in mid to late February and with a robust constitution, multi-nosed corms are capable of producing half a dozen flowers apiece, heavily purplish-blue stained on their outers, with an orange throat. Ginns, who lived on the Leicestershire/Northamptonshire border near Desborough, was a frequent visitor, bringing plants from his garden, 'Saindac', and often lecturing to the Nottingham Rock Garden Club (of which more shortly).

[Ed.: Saindak is a town in the Chagai District of Balochistan where Ginns spent some time.]

Ray's honed diplomatic skills were called upon when they judged together once when a joint show was held involving both cacti and alpine plant enthusiasts, for Ginns was unimpressed by the standard of certain plants, making his opinion known within the awkward hearing of the exhibitors. That was the end of that enterprise.

Ginns was commendably honest – perhaps *too* honest on the above occasion. Whereas the unprincipled, voracious expert gardener is a horticultural spectre of long-standing, notorious

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among those in the know but seldom discussed in public. Just one example: Ray helped supervise an open day for a friend in neighbouring Derbyshire. Having been tipped of that a visitor was behaving suspiciously, he confronted the crook, who was making off with various dug-up plants, and pointedly asked what on earth she was doing. 'I was looking for someone to pay for these sale items', she blustered (a likely story). Instructed to report straightaway to the owner, she promised to do just that. Neither she nor the plants were ever seen again.

His fabled generosity with plants was usually but not always reciprocated, as when he sent corms of another promising *Crocus* to a wholesale grower, casually saying: 'Let's talk about money afterwards', by inference anticipating a modest royalty. Later came a response from the recipient, 'I won't make a charge, *on this occasion*'. To top it all, when Ray asked for a couple of corms back, his own stock having dwindled, there came a non-apologetic refusal on the grounds that the beneficiary had too few to spare!



Crocus salzmannii f. *albus* 'El torcal'

I had an analogous experience regarding *Crocus salzmannii* f. *albus* 'El Torcal', Henning Christiansen's peerless 1973 introduction from southernmost Spain. This did very well indeed for me under glass from a small potful received from Ray in 1990 ('You must some time

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teach me how to grow crocuses', he teased, eyebrows just slightly raised) and I handed on stock to various people. One of them, to whom I donated a bumper largesse, brazenly told me that not only were there enough for his own needs but that he would be selling off the surplus – for his own gain, not mine. I've kept the letter to serve as a cautionary reminder.



Part of the dormant *Crocus* collection, ready for repotting.

Ray wrote very well indeed but far more often to correspondents than in published form. An exception was a letter to the RHS, published in *The Garden* (January 1988) and additionally noteworthy in that it was followed on the page by an 'a birth is announced' contribution from Joe Sharman, celebrating the arrival of *Galanthus plicatus* 'Wendy's Gold'. Ray's short piece, subtitled 'Albus, alba, album', concerned recent flowerings of albino *Crocus* seedlings after 30 years of sowing seed: 'Until last year I had not obtained a white-flowered seedling of any mauve or purple crocus, though white-flowered parents frequently give white progeny. Success came abundantly in October and November 1986'. He instanced *Crocus ligusticus* (syn. *medius*) 'very pale, not quite white... [retaining] the purple star in the throat', derived from a second-generation John Marr collection, *C. robertianus* (this species commemorating John Marr's son, who predeceased him), Cretan *C. oreocreticus* ('pure white apart from the characteristic pale buff shading on the outer perianth segments') and notably *C. laevigatus*. Given the clonal name 'Ray Cobb', one hopes this is still around, so too a pure white *C. pulchellus* 'Sylvia Cobb', named for his wife, though not by him.

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In a more recent article, 'Alpines for the young at heart', he described a return to Zermatt as an octogenarian, musing: 'As you get older, your choice of plant-hunting locations becomes limited. Ageing muscles render energetic climbs out the question... [and you opt for] ... a package holiday of a type you would have been scorned in your youth'. Taking a cable car to the Schwarzsee in early July, a 'relatively easy' climb to the Hornlihutte enabled him to see *Ranunculus glacialis* and other high alpines.

This was written for the onetime Nottingham Rock Garden Club (established in 1950), of which he was a founder member. Ray lectured almost annually to that group, acted as its chairman and eventually, its president. Following some or other speaker's turn on the rostrum, he often gave the vote of thanks, not unusually more informative and amusing than the offering that had gone before. Honourable exceptions included Gerard Parker's 'Round the garden of the late EA Bowles' (October 1955); Valerie Finnis's 'Alpines at Home and Abroad' (October 1957); EB Anderson's 'Rock Garden Bulbs' (December 1960; also 'A Miscellany of Alpines', September 1969) and John Marr's 'Plant collecting in southern Europe', November 1971 – the only one on this short list that I attended.

In its early years, Sir Charles & Lady Barbara Buchanan (of St Anne's Manor, Sutton Bonnington) were at the club's helm. They were fundamental in encouraging Ray's interest in snowdrops: Lady Barbara (née Stanley) was the daughter of Beatrix Stanley, Bowles's 'Aunt B'. These days 'galanthophiles', self-appointed or recognised as such by their peers, are numerous. But 50 and more years ago this was not the case. The circle was quite small, including the two 'EBs' (EA Bowles and EB Anderson, both of whom Ray knew), Chris



Brickell, Richard Nutt, the Parker-Jervises and fellow Oxfordian Primrose Warburg (who shared Ray's interest in *Fritillaria*).

Galanthus 'Straffan' – from Ireland, one of the oldest snowdrop cultivars.

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After the one-day April 1988 conference on the genus at the Chelsea Physic Garden, I was part of an otherwise distinguished gaggle heading for Sloane Square Underground station including her, Ray, Jack Elliott, Chris Skelmersdale, Kath Dryden and Joy Bishop. (Quite a gathering.) Taking up this theme, those were the days of the earliest snowdrop lunches, hosted by Primrose and friends. There was a celebrated occasion back in early 2011 when Avon Bulbs' Chris Ireland-Jones organised an 'Immortals Lunch' in Somerset for gardeners who had snowdrops named after them. Those in the group photograph, each clutching a pot of their dedicated clone, included Brian Mathew, Ronald Mackenzie, Matt Bishop, Ruby Baker and Carolyn Elwes. The last two sported outlandish headgear, mentioned at this juncture because they and others were noted for their millinery, so much so that Margaret Owen was dubbed 'The Hat' by gardening friends. Richard Nutt, another Immortal with an exceptionally late-flowering *Galanthus plicatus* representative to his credit, on occasion turned up wearing a deerstalker. As the accompanying family photograph testifies, Ray joined in, on grounds of practicality, to stave off the cold, having been thin on top for much of his adult life.



Ray in his hat. Image by Annette Sivers.

A consummate collector of the extraordinary, the unusual and the noteworthy, he knew and gathered into his circle gardeners of many types, only a few of them mentioned here. Robin & Joan Grout, who lived in Radcliffe-on-Trent, orchestrated the first edition of the *Hardy Plant Directory*, in 1975, which a decade later evolved into the *RHS Plant Finder*. Two years earlier, Major Robert Chaworth-Musters and his wife Maria had moved to Felley Priory, north of Papplewick, where his lifelong friends Geff & Kitty Buxton lived.

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Maria was largely responsible for the development of gardens still open to the public, long after her death. For snowdrop displays en masse, another priory 30 miles to the north (Hodsock) is recommended, but the collection brought together by Maria, based on contributions from Ray, has some distinguished elements, including *G. nivalis* Sandersii Group 'Ray Cobb'.

It is one of several *Galanthus* selections with which he is associated, for all that his precise namesake is – from an historical perspective – developmental rather than definitive. As with *Helleborus x hybridus*, yellow selections have come on a long way in the past several decades. There's also 'Little Ben', one of the 'Mighty Atom' amalgam; 'X-Ray' (a chance *G. elwesii* seedling, handed round bearing the label 'ex Ray Cobb', leading his old friend Ann Borrill to name it as such and incidentally nothing to do with Phil Cornish's 'X-Files'); and *G. 'Ron Ginn's byzantinus'*, a dubious appellation for a vigorous clone referable to *G. plicatus*. Notable modern additions to the garden ensemble included now almost worked out in NW Turkey *G. trojanus*, *G. elwesii* 'The Bride' (Phil Cornish, again) and a distinguished Margaret Owen selection, *G. 'Chris Sanders'*.



Left:

Galanthus 'Trumps' with *G. elwesii* 'The Bride'



Right: *Galanthus* 'Chris Sanders'

Chris Sanders is best known for his expertise in woody plants, ornamental flowering cherries to the fore. Another of Ray's seemingly endless side projects. In late April 1994, Channel 4 broadcast an episode of the short series 'Real Gardens', based on several Nottinghamshire gardens, mine and his among them. At 'Aurelia', presenter Roy Lancaster was so bowled

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over by *Prunus* 'Amanogawa' at its bountiful peak that few other plants got a look-in during the 10-minute slot. I came across as impatient and dismissive (who knew?), several people telephoned straight afterwards to relate – but Ray, in contradistinction, was relaxed and affable, they all agreed. (I see from my diary entries that the day after filming took place, I was off to the Harrogate Show at crack of dawn, the day after that down in Winchester, and on the Saturday took delivery of five tons of washed gravel. Phew!)

Other plants? He was fond of *Aquilegia*, growing most of the European species at one time or another. Indeed, he liked Ranunculaceae in general. Before their greater popularity and availability, he acquired several double hepaticas; as a hundredth birthday present, John Massey sent a signed copy of his monograph. Winter aconites have also been taken up in some quarters and new clones selected, most of them multi-petalled. *Eranthis hyemalis* CP 131 (col. Monte Pollino, Italy) he treasured, insisting it differed from the standard issue. Other than acknowledging that there are all too few documented collections from the western end of this species' distribution, and that I can tell it apart, just about, from any others, I defer.



Eranthis hyemalis CP 131, from Monte Pollino, Italy.

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Muscari he raised from wild-sourced seed dating back to 1960s expeditions to Turkey and Iran, sharing this interest with another lapsed National Collection holder, Jenny Robinson (she gave up her grape hyacinths in the mid-1990s due to failing eyesight, but a cataract operation provided a new lease of life during her last decade, through to 2010). Her celebrated Cypriot find, initially passed around as *M.* 'Baby's Breath', still doesn't appear to have a species name settled upon; occasionally, it has been catalogued as a form of *M. neglectum*. It does, however, have a clonal name change, since it is now known, fittingly, as *M.* 'Jenny Robinson'.

Scilla he also championed long before they were fashionable. I don't recall him relabelling any of them *Fessia*, despite growing *S. hohenackeri*, transferred there as long ago as 1998. He also distributed the distinguished, brilliant blue bulb that he called *x Chionoscilla allenii* 'Fra Angelico' (*Chionodoxa forbesii* is now incorporated in *Scilla*, so in most recent references this is given as an exemplar of *Scilla x allenii*). It came his way from EB Anderson, who in turn had it from Eliot Hodgkin – a level of impeccable provenance that he relished.

His rather dry garden harboured some unlikely inhabitants, for its owner didn't rule out hope over experience. I once visited to find him painstakingly pricking out *Primula obliqua* seedlings, of Sikkimese origin: you can guess their fate, for even in the wettest parts of Scotland it has always failed in short order. Another friend, Geoffrey Gould, made numerous *Kabschia Saxifraga* hybrids going back to the 1930s, *S. x anglica* 'Winifred' the most significant. Gould also dabbled in European *Primula* hybridising, producing *P. marginata* crosses such as *P.* 'Coningsby Blue', said to be an improved *P.* 'Linda Pope'. Long gone, I'm pretty sure. Ray had fond memories of (unexpectedly) earlier still flowering *P.* 'Coningsby Queen', a cowslip hybrid that – brought indoors – intoxicatingly perfumed the entire room.

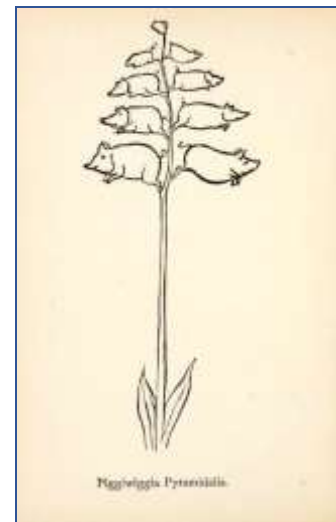
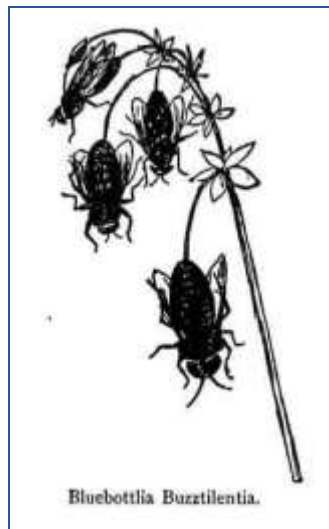
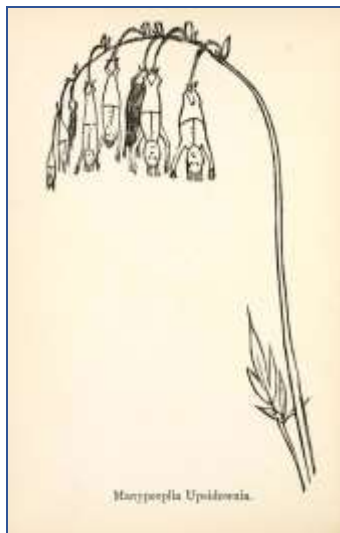
These and many other plants we would ponder, at my house or his. He would telephone, announce: 'Ray here', and arrange a visit to go through a list of subjects for discussion. Notebook in hand, we would go through them, he making jottings if I defied the odds and came up with something that he thought of interest. Then, politely, he would leave.

Plants aside, he took an interest in multitudinous other aspects of the natural world. In his nineties, he decided to study geology in depth and was instructed at university degree level by his friend Ian Sutton. Travel was another trademark activity, in his working life as present-day Boots UK Ltd's man with a suitcase everywhere from the United States to Japan, in his leisure time and after his retirement often as not in search of plants. He didn't normally bother

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to mention transport problems or the numerous other hiccups that reshape any traveller's itinerary from time to time. Even so, a plant-hunting trip to eastern Turkey with Tony Willis tested his sangfroid to the limit. At the outset, the Erzurum hotel in which they were staying burst into flames; three days later, they had an initially alarming encounter with a detachment of rifle-toting Kurdish separatists.

Others will perhaps be encouraged by this account to add their reminiscences. Ray was gregarious, convivial and by any token an enduring figure in contemporary British horticulture. This incomplete version of events I end by mentioning fantasy creations from one of Ray's favourite authors, Edward Lear. All drawn by that humourist, combining anthropology, botany and entomology, *Bluebottlia buzztilentia*, *Manypeepia upsidownia* and *Piggyawiggia pyramidalis* are not a jot less convincing than some unintentionally comedic taxonomy. As the man who long ago recited a good-natured insider joke about a *Camellia* but forbade me from repeating it, I hope he would have approved. R.R.



The Nonsense Botany of Edward Lear - illustrations from the internet, including, below, *Pollybirdia singularica*, *Smalltoothcombia domestica*, *Shoebootia utilis* and *Tickia orologica*.

