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Snowdrops: Science, Myths, and Folklore

BY BARBARA SCHRAMM

I looked out my office window to my lifeless garden below, which is ringed with cobalt blue bottles to stave off the dullness of winter. Then one cold day with branches bare, gray skies overhead, and snow covered ground, something magical happened. The snowdrops *Galanthus nivalis* have pushed their way up through the snow. I wanted to jump with joy when I saw the little white buds and later their delicate, white blossoms. Snowdrops, also called the Flowers of Hope, and the Fair Maid of February, are the harbingers of spring. Lured by their appearance,

I slipped on my blue, toasty-warm puff coat and boots and went to the garden. There, on my hands and knees, I photographed, nose-to-nose, the little blossoms. When I breathed in their delicate fragrance, I felt happy. I was eager to learn more about them.

For example, snowdrops' thermogenesis melts the snow. Their outer petals are stronger than their inner ones, which allows the buds to push through the snow, heads up. When they bloom, the blossoms face downward. Sweet nectar within the inner petals draws hummingbirds and bees.

The Historical Prospective

In the 16th century, John Gerard, a botanist and herbalist, and author of the 1,484-paged *Herball*, compared the snowdrop and snowflake. He found they were so similar he named them early and late blooming Bulbous Violet. In 1465, he listed the plant as *Lencis i viola alba*, or the white violet. At first, Gerard said snowdrops had no medicinal value, but later they were listed as an emmenagogue used to regulate menstruation and more (Larkin 2009; "Snowdrops" 2011). In the 1950s, snowdrops were used to



Snowdrops on April 8, 2016, Ithaca, NY. Photo by author.

successfully treat polio in Bulgaria. (Kew Science n.d.; “Snowdrops” 2011).

The Scientific Perspective

An article in *Planta Medica* 2009, reported researchers in Barcelona found 10 alkaloids in snowdrops *Galanthus nivalis*, and another seven in *Galanthus elwesii*. Of the 17, three were new to science. The haemantamine-type alkaloids can cause highly selective apoptosis (programed cell death, involved in the control of development and growth). In *Galanthus elwesii*, licorice derivatives have anti-malarial properties and can inhibit the enzyme acetylcholinesterase, which effects the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. Galantamine is approved for treating mild to moderate cases of Alzheimer’s disease and treating traumatic injuries. In *Galanthus nivalis*, agglutinin lectin, is said to help injuries and the nervous system. Lectin is an antibacterial and antiviral. It inhibits protein synthesis. Research is being done to determine its efficacy in fighting retroviruses like HIV and AIDS. (“Three New Alkaloids” 2010).

Sam Malone, who suffers from Lyme disease, blogs about his success in combating Lyme disease by making and taking a tincture made from snowdrops. At first he used the whole plant, now he uses the leaves and flowers which have less lectin. (Malone 2013).

The Mayo Clinic offers extensive information on products containing galantamine, US brand name Razadyne, Razadyne ER, Razadyne IR, with warnings of interactions with other medications. (Mayo Clinic 2016). Is that because snowdrops remedies and Razadyne actions are similar?

The demand for snowdrops has caused “galanthrophiles,” snowdrop mania. The costs to purchase them have spiraled upward. Snowdrops are so sought out that picking them in Spain is prohibited. (Malone 2013). Perhaps we should plant more snowdrops or share the snowdrops we have?

Myths

Legend says when Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, it was winter and snowing. Eve was cold and cried for the warmth of Paradise. God took pity on

her and transformed some of the snowflakes into snowdrops. The plant was then named the Flower of Hope. The Druids named the snowdrop to honor the goddess Bridget, the goddess of poetry, inspiration, and healing. In a German legend, snow lacked color, so God asked the plants and animals for some of their color. The animal’s response was, “No.” Only the snowdrop was willing to share her color—white (Larkin 2009; “Snowdrops” 2011).

The Folklore

In the Caucasus mountains in Southern Russia, old people eat the bulb to strengthen the brain and to feel younger. In Bulgaria, people rub it on their foreheads to ease pain. The snowdrop uses are said to range from an insecticide, to a remedy for memory problems. (Larkin 2009; “Snowdrop” 2011).

From the scientific perspective, to folklore, indications point to snowdrops playing an important role in health. Personally, I embrace the natural approach to medicine, but I also strive to be an informed consumer. Always consult a qualified expert before taking any remedy, or confer with your physician. This material is not intended as medical advice.

At this moment, April 8 in the Northeast, bitter cold weather lingers, the skies are gray, and the tree branches are bare. The snow flurries were so dense this morning that my garden view was nearly obliterated. But I’ve seen my snowdrops, the Flowers of Hope, and the harbinger of spring. How grand. ▼

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When I was very young, my father showed me how to look under a wild ginger leaf for the little cinnamon colored cup. I was delighted. I have had a passion for plants since then, especially medicinal plants. I lead

my first woodland walk when I was 13. After nursing school, a degree in Health Psychology from Empire State Collage, and becoming a Certified Health Care Practitioner, I studied many different healing modalities and natural remedies such as homeopathic remedies, flower essences, and essential oils. I became a master gardener in 2000, and then took a two-year apprenticeship in Medicinal Herbs. I developed teaching gardens at The Foundation of Light in Ithaca, New York, and led garden walks for children such as “Taste, Touch and Smell,” and for adults as well. Truly, plants are our teachers. My front dooryard garden is full of medicinal plants. Tea from Lemon balm, *Melissa officinalis* for a relaxing tea, and much more. Discovering the properties of the little Snowdrops was a treat. Studying the folklore, the uses, and the history, is a joy.

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