

## Snowdrops



**Snowdrops bloom very early in the spring.**

These are not showy plants, producing delicate-looking, solitary, pendant, white flowers. The waxy blooms have six petal-like segments (botanically tepals). The three outer ones are always longer than the inner ones and are solid white. The three inner ones are notched at the tip and are marked with green around this notch. The plants have two or three dark green, strap-like leaves that grow 4-10" tall. The leaf tips are thickened sort of like a nail on a finger, protecting the flower bud as they push through the soil.

Common snowdrop, *G. nivalis*, has 4" leaves that are ¼" wide and produces 1"-long flowers. It originated in eastern Turkey, the Caucasus, northern Iraq and western Iran and is hardy to zone 3. There are numerous cultivars of this species (one book has 500 listed – most only available in Europe); some of the more distinctive and readily available ones include:

- 'Atkinsii' (or 'James Backhouse') – robust grower that frequently has deformed flowers, or extra petals
- 'Flore Pleno' – double flowers, excellent for naturalizing in woodlands
- 'Sam Arnott' – large flowered and fragrant
- 'Viridi-apice' – outer segments green blotched, and more robust than the species
- 'White Dream' – has a white stripe on its leaves

Giant snowdrop, *G. elwesii*, is not as hardy, surviving reliably only to zone 4 or 5, but is still a vigorous plant. It has wider leaves (to 1") and larger flowers (1¼"-2") with a more conspicuous green blotch than common snowdrop. This species withstands hot weather better than the common snowdrop.

Other species, not commonly available for purchase, include *G. byzantinus* with longer leaves and smaller flowers, hardy to zone 5 and a better choice for southern gardens being a native of western Turkey; *G. plicatus*, Crimean snowdrop, has broad leaves folded back at the edges; the Greek species



**The delicate white flowers have green markings.**

*G. reginae-olgae* which blooms in the fall and is also hardy to zone 5; and *G. woronowii* (often labeled *G. ikariae latifolius* in commerce) from Russia, the Caucasus, and adjacent parts of Turkey and Iran has recurved foliage and is listed by some as hardy to zone 2.

Snowdrops are sometimes confused with snowflakes (*Leucojum* spp.), which also has white flowers with green markings. However, *Leucojum* plants are usually taller, have 2-3 flowers per stem, and their tepals are the same length.



**Leucojum flowers are similar to snowdrops, but have petals all the same length.**



**Snowdrops form compact colonies once established.**

These are small plants, so are best situated near walks, pathways, or in elevated gardens where their delicate beauty can be better appreciated. Also, since they bloom when the weather is often still quite cool, place them where they are visible from the house. They look best when planted at least three or four plants together. They are attractive set against evergreens or interplanted in ground covers or with low-growing evergreen perennials such as candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*) or deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*). They can be placed under deciduous trees or shrubs, at the edge of the border or woodland areas, or even in the lawn (but that area should not be mowed until the foliage has matured, about 6 weeks after blooming). Because

of their small size, snowdrops are ideal for rock gardens. Combine them with other early-blooming bulbs such as winter aconite (*Eranthus hyemalis*), Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*), glory-of-the snow (*Chionodoxa*), and early, small daffodils such as 'Tête-à-tête' or 'Jack Snipe'. They can even be used in containers and for forcing.

Grow snowdrops in a location that has full sun during the spring when the foliage is apparent. They prefer rich, well-drained soil. Plant the dry bulbs early in the fall, but after the soil has cooled – generally when nighttime temperatures are in the 40's and 50's. Space the plants 3" apart and set the bulbs 3" deep. Fertilize in early spring when shoots first appear or after blooming. Allow the foliage to die back naturally after they bloom in the spring. Allow the soil where the bulbs are planted to dry out in the summer (if possible).



**Plant the dry bulbs in fall, but transplant plants after flowering when still green, if possible.**

Snowdrops do not multiply as readily as some of the other small bulbs, often taking a few years to get established, but eventually will form large compact colonies if left undisturbed. They may produce new plants from seed, taking about 4 years to bloom. Or they can be propagated by digging and dividing the bulbs immediately after flowering while the foliage is still green. Replant the bulbs immediately after digging. These bulbs have few pests and are not bothered by deer, rabbits, or voles and other rodents.

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### Additional Information:

- *Galanthus nivalis* – on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at [www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/plant.asp?code=K300](http://www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/plant.asp?code=K300)
- Growing Hardy Bulbs – Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet HYG-1237-98 at [ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1237.html](http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1237.html)
- Spring Bulb Guide: Galanthus – information on Bulb.com at [www.bulb.com](http://www.bulb.com) (choose Public > Spring Bulbs > Springflowering Bulb Guide > Galanthus)
- The book *Snowdrops: A Monograph of the Cultivated Galanthus* – over 350 pages detailed information on every aspect of wild and cultivated snowdrops, illustrated with hundreds of excellent pictures of snowdrops both in the wild and in gardens, with many close-up studio shots. Available direct from the publishers, Griffin Press ([www.griffinpress.co.uk/snowdrop.htm](http://www.griffinpress.co.uk/snowdrop.htm)), and perhaps other vendors.