

Many of us have been collectors at some point in our lives. My son collects hockey cards. I have an interest in antique coffee tins. Jay Leno collects cars.

But there are gardeners, mostly in the UK, who collect rare types of snowdrops (*Galanthus*) and will pay a frightening amount of money to obtain them. A recent story in *The Guardian* newspaper relates how the prices for individual bulbs of rare varieties has risen from \$400 in 2008, to \$550 in 2011, \$1115 in 2012 to \$2500 in 2014!

If you've ever grown *Galanthus nivalis*, the most common species of this early blooming bulb, you'll know that they're not at all difficult to grow. They're hardy, often the first flower to bloom in the winter garden and they quickly form a carpet of white in the border. Snowdrops, with their simple design and pure colours, definitely bring a sense of joy to the winter-weary gardener.

Something else snowdrops are adept at is reproducing. If you've ever grown them you know how easily they spread. While they're spreading they're also mutating; double flowers, inner petals that are entirely white or green, green splashes on the outer petals and even the occasional splash of yellow!

That variety is 'Elizabeth Harrison.' In 2012 the British seed company Thompson and Morgan paid \$1,115 for a single bulb. Two years later they still only had a single bulb; it seems that the more unusual the variant the more difficult it is to propagate under controlled conditions, hence the high prices being paid. Breeders are working on this problem so prices should come down.

In the meantime those of us who aren't snowdrop collectors with unlimited funds will concentrate on the more readily available (and cheaper) varieties. Snowdrops grow best with cool, consistently moist soil. This isn't a problem in late winter as the soil retains melted snow and temperatures are naturally cool (with the exception of this year!).

If you plant bulbs where they're subjected to full sun and heat the rest of the growing season they'll struggle however. Shade from trees or larger shrubs is much appreciated so plan accordingly when you purchase your bulbs this fall.

Two old English names for snowdrops are fair maids of February and Candlemas bells. Tradition holds that if a person picked a bowl of snowdrops and brought them indoors on Candlemas (February 2) the house and everything in it would be purified.