

If February had a mother, then even she would be hard pushed to see the good side of her beloved child. It's not a month when we spring lightly from bed, fling open the doors and rush out into the garden. In Florida, it's strawberry season, but in the United Kingdom, it's grey and cold. Rather like an airport, it's something we have to endure before we're allowed to enjoy ourselves and the first flutterings of spring arrive. All the more reason to celebrate those few plants that flower at this grim time. Bring them on!

Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

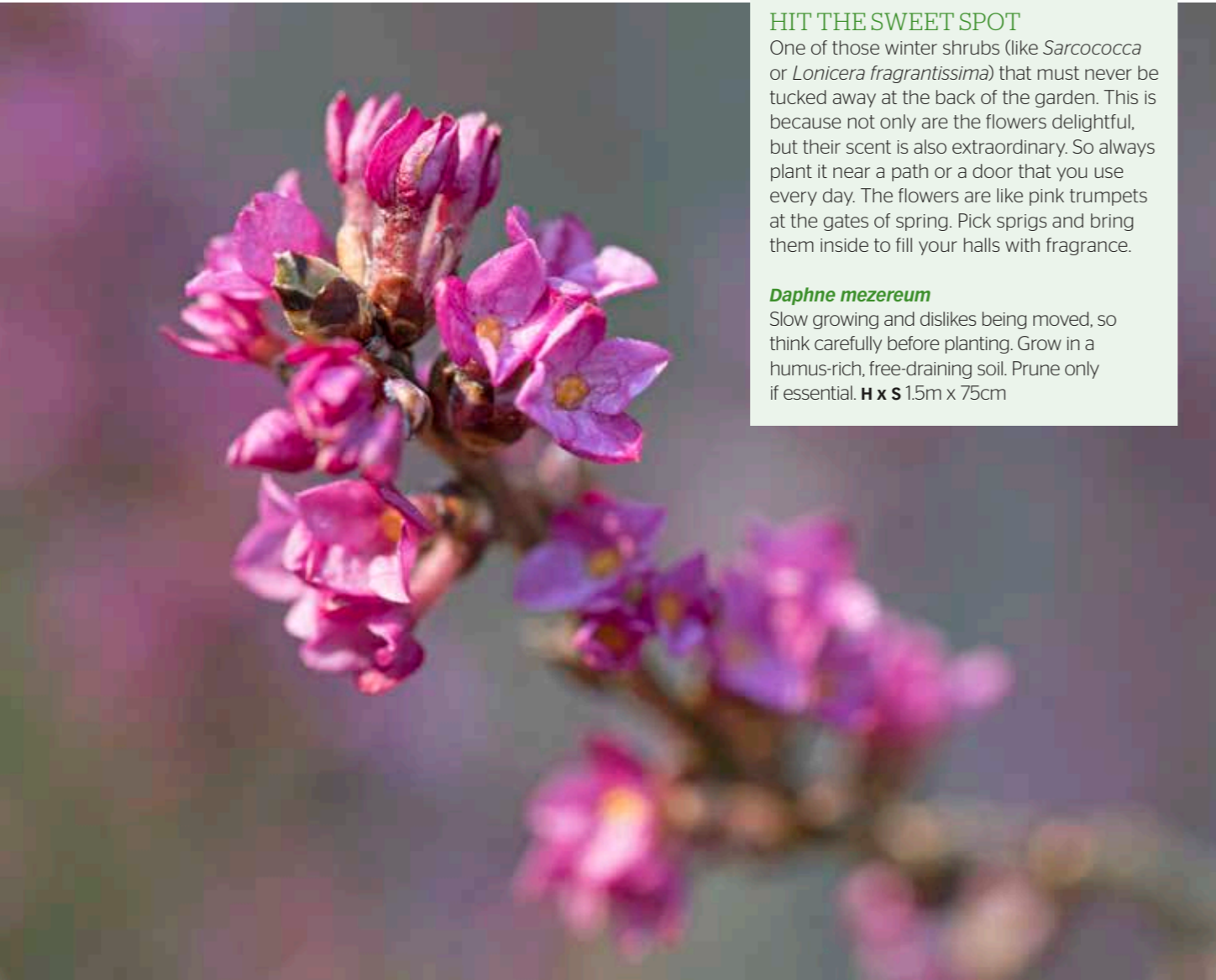
STAR OF THE MONTH
Helleborus x hybridus

Hellebores are quite – how shall I put it delicately – promiscuous. They happily hybridise and cross with all-comers, which (if one ignores the moral laxity) is a good thing for gardeners, as it means that we now have hellebores in every colour from white to deep, thundery, purple. In the ancient world, they were used to cure madness, notably in the case of the king of Argos's daughters, who were given to running naked through the streets – very different from the home life of our own royal family. This particular variety is a fabulous winter red.

If you want a hellebore identical to the parent, then divide the plant in September. If you feel lucky, sow seed when ripe.
Height x Spread 40cm x 50cm

PHOTO: JASON INGRAM, WITH THANKS TO CREDALE NURSERY

We Love February
for its little gang of early blooms



HIT THE SWEET SPOT

One of those winter shrubs (like *Sarcococca* or *Lonicera fragrantissima*) that must never be tucked away at the back of the garden. This is because not only are the flowers delightful, but their scent is also extraordinary. So always plant it near a path or a door that you use every day. The flowers are like pink trumpets at the gates of spring. Pick sprigs and bring them inside to fill your halls with fragrance.

Daphne mezereum

Slow growing and dislikes being moved, so think carefully before planting. Grow in a humus-rich, free-draining soil. Prune only if essential. **H x S** 1.5m x 75cm

provides pollen and nectar for wildlife



GOLDEN WONDER

Now this is a real tasty winter treat, although for some reason *Stachyurus* is not that widely grown. I saw my first one at the top of a bank in Northamptonshire. It was a bright winter day and I came round the corner to be dazzled by these gracefully hanging stalactites of flower - a properly unforgettable moment. This is a Japanese native that will really liven up this mildly depressing month.

Stachyurus praecox

A bit of acid in the soil will help it thrive. Prune after flowering and apply mulch to the soil surface in spring. **H x S** 3m x 3m

CHEEKY FACES

Where would our winter windowboxes and containers be without the ever reliable viola?

They fill the gap between late autumn perennials and the first of the spring bulbs, flowering happily and surviving whatever snows, frosts and deluges that winter may send. There are many different varieties, from white to blues and purples. This one looks a little like a flutter of queuing butterflies that have woken a bit early.

Viola Sorbet Morpho

Best in full sun. Free flowering. Deadhead to keep plants tidy and prolong flowering. **H x S** 15cm x 15cm



PHOTOS: GETTY/LASZLO PODOR, DAN ROSENHOLM, JASON INGRAM



A FINE ROMANCE

Another pair of brave souls giving us flowers and colour in the face of winter – they make a lovely combination to grow under deciduous shrubs or trees. The simplicity of the common primrose enhances the exoticism of the Turkish cyclamen. The grassy bank of the home counties meets the seraglio.

Primula vulgaris

Best naturalised in grass or among trees or shrubs. Delicate scent. Great in a small vase as a cut flower. Propagate from seed or root cuttings. **H x S** 10cm x 15cm

Cyclamen coum

Plant about 5cm deep in a partially shaded spot that won't get too wet in summer. Sow seeds when ripe – it's often best to soak them overnight. **H x S** 10cm x 10cm



BIG HIT

This snowdrop is named after a distinguished fellow called Samuel Arnott – a 19th-century Scots gardener and galanthophile. Often the differences between the original species snowdrop and these more elevated varieties are very subtle and only noticeable to the expert or aficionado. It's a great deal easier to pick this one out from the crowd, as it's much more distinctive, being quite a bit beefier and with deliciously scented flowers.

Galanthus 'S. Arnott'

Best planted 'in the green' – this means after it has flowered and before it goes to sleep for the summer. **H x S** 20cm x 10cm

For more on snowdrops, see our Over the Fence debate on p20. And to buy snowdrops 'in the green', see our Reader Offer on p91.

PHOTOS: JASON INGRAM