

Traditionally, this month is about cleansing (after the Latin word *februum*, which means purification). Having survived the excesses of Christmas and the perennially disappointing bun fight that is New Year, we are girding ourselves for spring. Breathing in lungfuls of ice-cold air, we are sitting in front of fires and (possibly) still sticking to our resolution to always take the stairs (instead of lifts) and go regularly to yoga classes. In the garden, it is a time of preparation: attending to the last bits of tidying up, making sure all our tools are sharp and enjoying the first bulbs of spring.

Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

STAR OF THE MONTH

Hamamelis x intermedia 'Rubin'

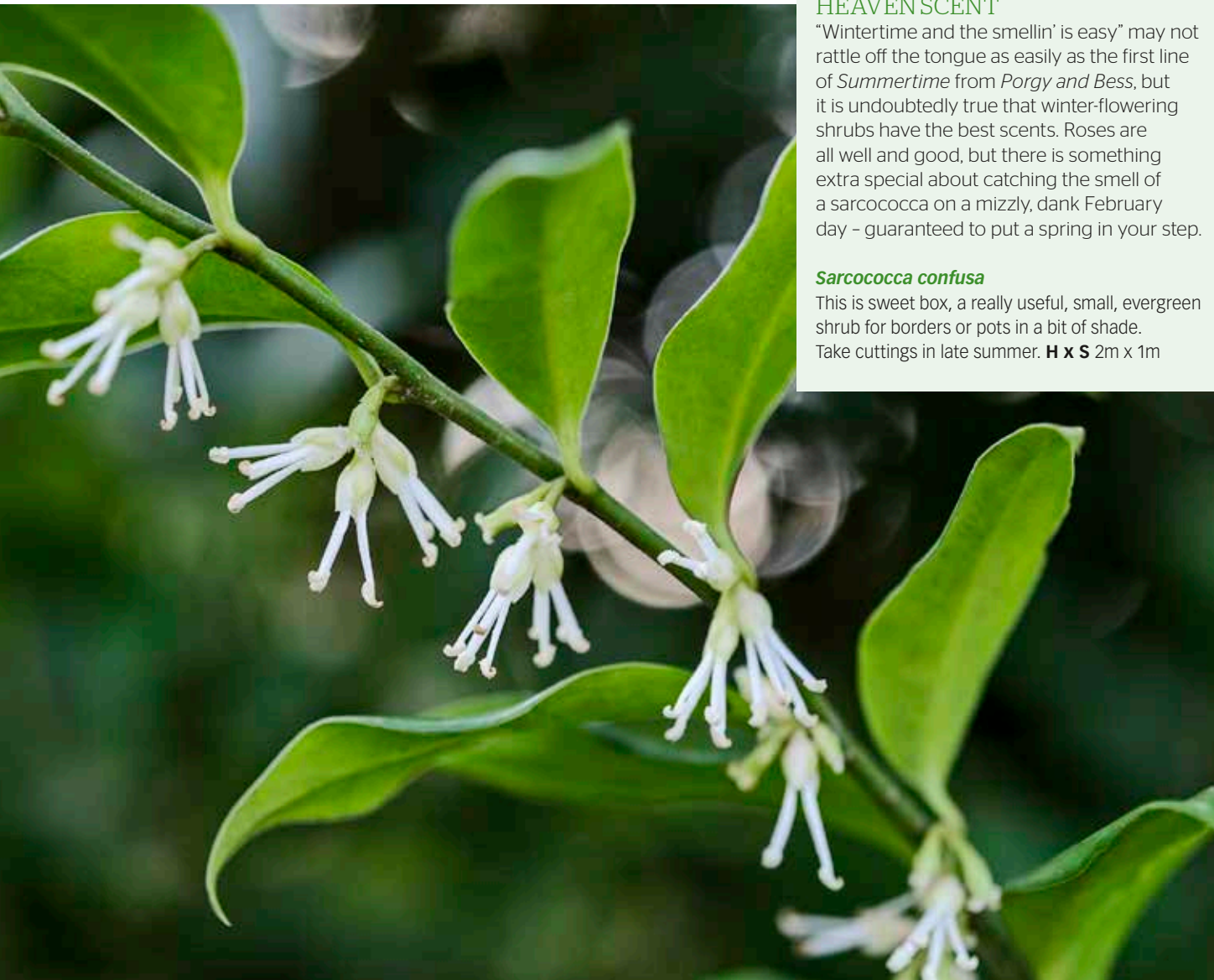
I love all the plants we have on these pages, but it is particularly satisfying when we choose one that I have in my garden. It is quite a new plot and, as a result, I have been doing a lot of plant shopping and moving things around. I am sure that designers should be more methodical and organised, but in my own garden I keep changing my mind. However, one of the unchanged shrubs is this beautiful witch hazel. Scent, zippy colour and great leaves (especially in the autumn) have earned it a permanent place in my sunny border.

Easy to grow, as long as it is not too exposed. Propagation is by grafting, so not suitable for beginners. Scented.

Height x Spread 4m x 3.5m

PHOTO: SARAH CUTTLE, TAKEN AT RHS WISLEY, SURREY

*We Love February
for tantalising glimmers of spring*

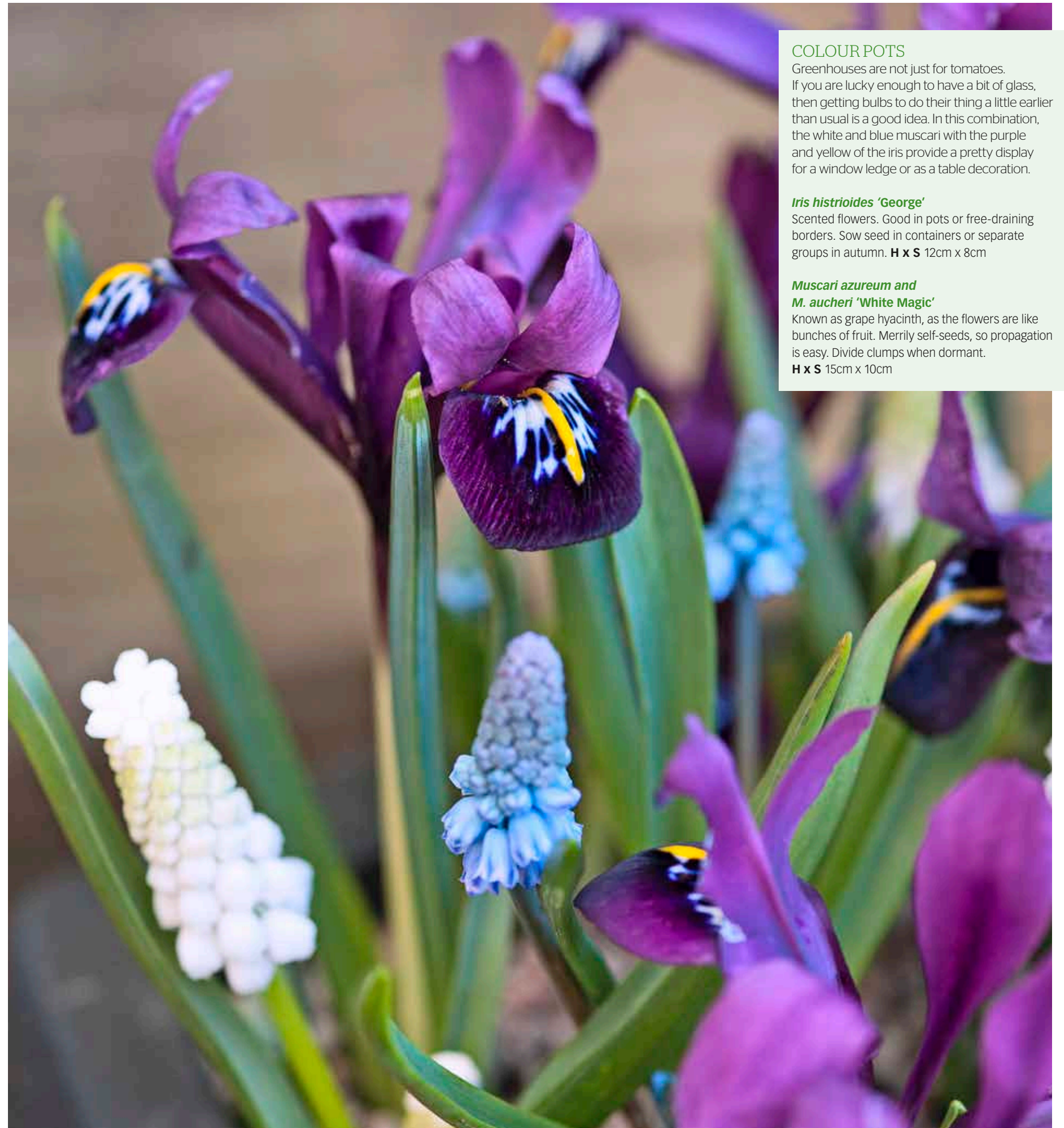


HEAVENSCENT

"Wintertime and the smellin' is easy" may not rattle off the tongue as easily as the first line of *Summertime* from *Porgy and Bess*, but it is undoubtedly true that winter-flowering shrubs have the best scents. Roses are all well and good, but there is something extra special about catching the smell of a sarcococca on a mizzly, dank February day - guaranteed to put a spring in your step.

Sarcococca confusa

This is sweet box, a really useful, small, evergreen shrub for borders or pots in a bit of shade. Take cuttings in late summer. **H x S** 2m x 1m



COLOUR POTS

Greenhouses are not just for tomatoes. If you are lucky enough to have a bit of glass, then getting bulbs to do their thing a little earlier than usual is a good idea. In this combination, the white and blue muscari with the purple and yellow of the iris provide a pretty display for a window ledge or as a table decoration.

***Iris histrioides* 'George'**

Scented flowers. Good in pots or free-draining borders. Sow seed in containers or separate groups in autumn. **H x S** 12cm x 8cm

***Muscari azureum* and *M. aucheri* 'White Magic'**

Known as grape hyacinth, as the flowers are like bunches of fruit. Merrily self-seeds, so propagation is easy. Divide clumps when dormant. **H x S** 15cm x 10cm

CREEPING BEAUTY

This is a low, ground-covering variety and very useful it is, too - I have it growing under some birch trees, where the ground is so dry and rooty that almost everything else takes one look and refuses to grow. Not so the ever-obliging creeping Oregon grape. I would be lying if I told you that it was an exciting plant, but it does the job, so I forgive all shortcomings.

Mahonia repens

Excellent source of early-season food for insects. Leaves take on a hint of purple over winter. Scented flowers. **H x S** 50cm x 100cm



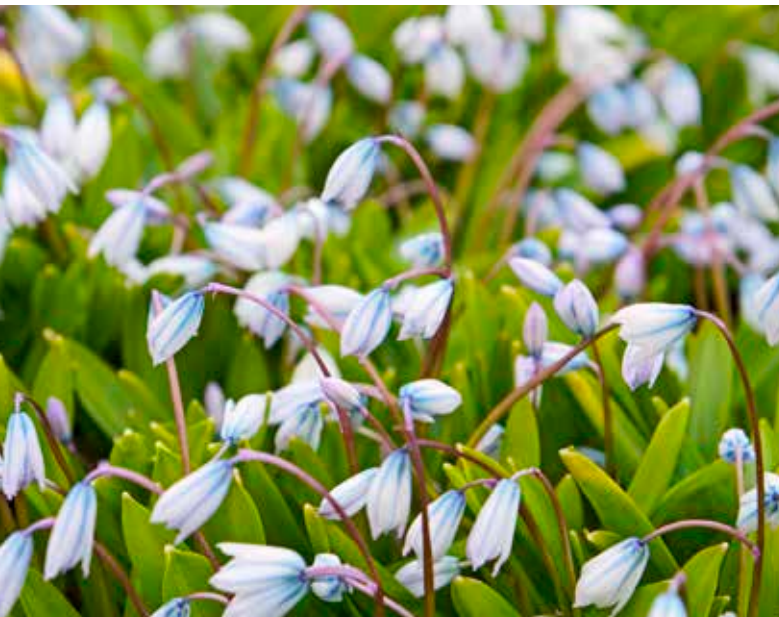


WILLOWY WANDERINGS

Usually when we talk about good winter stems our attention is drawn to the screaming scarlets, yelling yellows and roaring 'rufousness' of dogwoods. We must not, however, forget the willows. While not quite as flashy, they still perform during the lean months and, unlike dogwoods, can be woven into hurdles, baskets or (probably) hats. They also grow incredibly fast, so create an excellent quick screen – particularly on damp ground.

Salix alba

Easily grown from cuttings – push a pencil-sized bit of stem into the ground and it will root very quickly. Coppice each spring. **H x S** 20m x 8m (if allowed to grow into a tree)

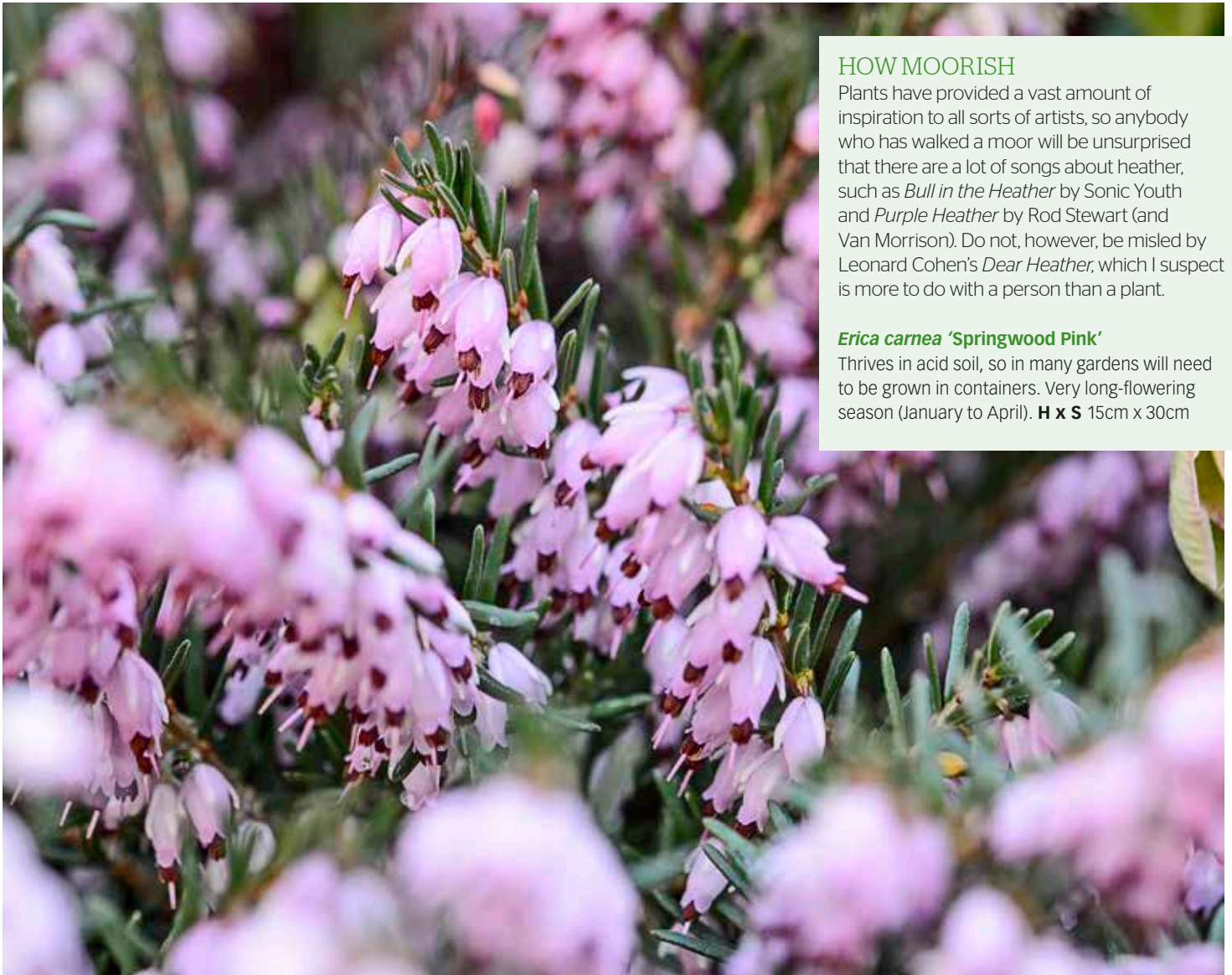


DON'T BE SCILLA

This scilla has an alluring name: it is difficult to track down its exact etymology – the internet only offers us a Ukrainian footballer called Andriy Mischenko. Instead, let us imagine that it was named after a concubine with cerulean eyes. An impoverished botanist from the Caucasus fell in love with her and named this scilla after her. Sadly, a jealous prince discovered this affair and both botanist and his lover met a nasty end.

Scilla mischtschenkoana

Excellent for the edges of borders, in pots or among gravelly rock gardens. Sow seed in pots in a cold frame. **H x S** 15cm x 10cm



HOW MOORISH

Plants have provided a vast amount of inspiration to all sorts of artists, so anybody who has walked a moor will be unsurprised that there are a lot of songs about heather, such as *Bull in the Heather* by Sonic Youth and *Purple Heather* by Rod Stewart (and Van Morrison). Do not, however, be misled by Leonard Cohen's *Dear Heather*, which I suspect is more to do with a person than a plant.

Erica carnea 'Springwood Pink'

Thrives in acid soil, so in many gardens will need to be grown in containers. Very long-flowering season (January to April). **H x S** 15cm x 30cm

SMALL BUT ZIPPY

One of my favourite early irises. This little group (we have another representative this month in *Iris histrioides* 'George' a couple of pages back, cavorting with a muscari) gives a wonderful start to the year. It has splashes of blue and is perfect for containers or the edges of borders. This one looks as if someone has flicked a fountain pen at the flowers and dotted every petal with ink spots.

Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'

Needs good drainage and a sunny position. Looks good, as here, combined with other small bulbs, such as crocus or *Narcissus* 'February Silver'.

H x S 12cm x 8cm



PHOTOS: SARAH CUTTLE; JASON INGRAM