

Spring Snowdrop Identification:

M.J. Crawley, 2010

There are just four key points

Leaf width (narrow or broad; use your little finger nail as a ruler)

Leaf colour (blue grey or bright grass green)

Leaf base (wrap-around or flat-facing)

Petal mark (mouth, base, both or solid)

1) Leaf width

Narrow (width less than a little finger nail) is *Galanthus nivalis*

Broader than a little finger nail is the rest. Hybrids are intermediate

2) Leaf colour



Greyish blue-green (the norm, as in the narrow-leaved *G. nivalis*, left); bright grass green (as in *G. woronowii* (right) and rarely *G. ikariae*)

3) Leaf base

This is taxonomically the most distinctive feature. Most species have the two leaves from each bulb flat and facing each other like hands in prayer (applanate, as in *G. plicatus*, right below). In *G. elwesii* and its hybrids the base of the outer leaf wraps around and embraces the interior leaf (supervolute or convolute, left below)



4) Petal marks

The normal pattern is a single green mark at the open end (the mouth or apex) of the inner petals. This is typically U-shaped or V-shaped, but a fantastic range of curious patterns is observed. This is what Galanthophiles get really excited about.



In the top left panel you see a faint green mark on the outer petals (a rare feature). Bottom right is what Galanthophiles call “Sad Face”. Other shapes resemble scissors, others chromosomes, others boxer shorts, and so on.

5) Double flowers

You will often find clumps of double flowers (*G. nivalis* Flore Pleno) which look like Victorian lampshades, growing amongst swathes of common snowdrop (*G. nivalis*).



Other doubles have been bred intentionally. *G.* 'Titania' (below left) has green on the outside of the inner petals. These *Greatorex* hybrids typically involve *G. plicatus* as the female parent, with pollen from *G. nivalis* 'Flore Pleno', and are named after female characters from Shakespeare. *G.* 'Blewbury Tart' looks upwards (below right)



6) Snowdrops with grass green leaves

These are infrequent, but of the two species, *G. waronowii* (below left) is much the most likely to be found, and has a pale green mark reminiscent of a chromosome. *G. ikariae* (below right) has a dark green mark like a pair of boxer shorts



7) Commonly found hybrids of *G. nivalis*

The two most distinctive cultivars of common snowdrop are *G.* 'Magnet' (below left, with a clear V mark) and *G.* 'Atkinsii' (below right, with a broad U mark). The first has noticeably big flowers with a very long pedicel. The second has long, narrow, droopy outer petals.



8) Variation in marking within *G. elwesii* and *G. plicatus*



Notice the hooded leaf tips in *G. elwesii* (above left). The X-pattern (right) is the most frequently seen mark in *G. elwesii*. A single apical spot is characteristic of *G. elwesii* var. *monostictus* (below, left), and a single apical mark is the norm in *G. plicatus* (below, right).



G. plicatus subsp. *byzantinus* has two spots (below, left) and is told from typical *G. elwesii* (below, right) by its flat (not wrapped) leaves with longitudinal folds and in-rolled margins.



9) Flowers with yellow markings

These are rare, but many are derived from the Northumbrian *G.* 'Sandersii' group (left, below). Some of the most sought-after cultivars are golden as in *G.* 'Wendy's Gold' (right, below)



10) Oddities and rarities

One of the most sought-after species by hard-core Galanthophiles is *G. lagodechianus*



Undistinguished on the outside (left), but the markings of long and short lines inside the inner petals are distinctive.

Key to the common British spring-flowering snowdrops

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Leaves blue grey-green (the typical colour) | 2 |
| 1. Leaves bright grass green (uncommon) | 5 |
| 2. Leaves narrow (less than 6 mm) | 3 |
| 2. Leaves broad (more than 9 mm) | 4 |
| 3. Flowers single | <i>G. nivalis</i> |
| 3. Flowers double | <i>G. nivalis</i> 'Flore Pleno' |
| 4. Leaf bases wrapped, leaves smooth, hood-tipped | <i>G. elwesii</i> |
| 4. Leaf bases flatly opposed, folded length-wise (plicate) | <i>G. plicatus</i> |
| 5. Inner petals with a light green V mark | <i>G. woronowii</i> |
| 5. Inner petals with a dark green mark like boxer shorts (rare) | <i>G. ikariae</i> |

Hybrids between *G. nivalis* and both *G. plicatus* and *G. elwesii* are frequent, and tend to be intermediate in leaf size and shape and in the degree of wrap-around. Many of the garden cultivars are of hybrid origin, and are difficult or impossible to name with certainty. If in doubt, record these as "close to" the dominant parental species, which will most often be *G. nivalis*.

The two common broad-leaved species are further divided on the basis of whether or not they have green spots at both the apex and the base:

G. plicatus

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Green spot at apex only | <i>G. plicatus</i> subsp. <i>plicatus</i> |
| Green spots at both apex and base | <i>G. plicatus</i> subsp. <i>byzantinus</i> |

G. elwesii

- | | |
|---|---|
| Green spots at both apex and base (or X or solid green) | <i>G. elwesii</i> |
| Green spot at apex only | <i>G. elwesii</i> var. <i>monostictus</i> |