

The Seasons

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The First Signs of Spring

Last year, we established a small patch of hellebores in the Spring Garden at St Clement's, under the cherry tree facing Portugal Place. They are a mixture of traditional 'Harvington' and modern 'Snow Rose' (*Helleborus x glandorfensis*) varieties. Both are winter-flowering perennials, but in the microclimate in the Spring Garden it is the robust Frostkist Snow Rose Anna's Red (1), bred by Richard Davey, that is currently making the running.

Another variety of hellebore that proliferates in the churchyard is *Helleborus foetidissima*. Our exemplars of *H. foetidissima* seem to last throughout the winter and their growth is already well advanced (2).

Perhaps more appropriate for the season, however, are Christmas Roses (*Helleborus niger*). *H. niger* is native to the European Alps and Appenines where its frost-resistant blooms are some of the earliest flowers of the year. These natural varieties are more difficult to grow, but their pure white sepals provide a wonderful sight (3,4). Their ability to flower in frosty conditions may be enhanced by the presence of nectar-metabolizing thermogenic yeasts within their nectaries, which also provide a source of warmth and sustenance for early-flying insects.

We also have a late-flowering variety of hellebore in the churchyard, *H. orientalis*, the Lenten Rose, which is native to Greece, Turkey and the Caucasus, and was named *Helleborus orientalis* ('Hellébore du Levant') by the French evolutionary biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck in 1789.



A promenade around the churchyard reveals further awakenings.

In close proximity to the hellebores, at the base of the cherry tree in the Spring Garden, is a patch of cyclamen, *Cyclamen hederifolia* (5). Their beautiful, heart-shaped variegated leaves are a striking contrast to the remaining brown leaves of autumn. This cyclamen was named "hederifolia" by the Scottish botanist William Aiton (1731-1793) on account of its leaves resembling those of ivy (*Hedera helix*). Cyclamen are members of the family Primulaceae which also contains the familiar spring flowers primroses (*Primula vulgaris*), oxlips (*Primula elatior*) and cowslips (*Primula veris*). Indeed, cowslips, together with their snowdrop companions, are already making an appearance in the churchyard (6), presaging the arrival of their flowers in weeks to come. We have planted quite a few cowslips, grown on from plugs last year, between the Spring Garden and the area around the Wood memorial. Hearteningly, these seem to be taking off (7).

Another resilient resident of the 'front' garden is growing well – the Mediterranean Spurge (*Euphorbia characias*) (8), of which more later in the year.

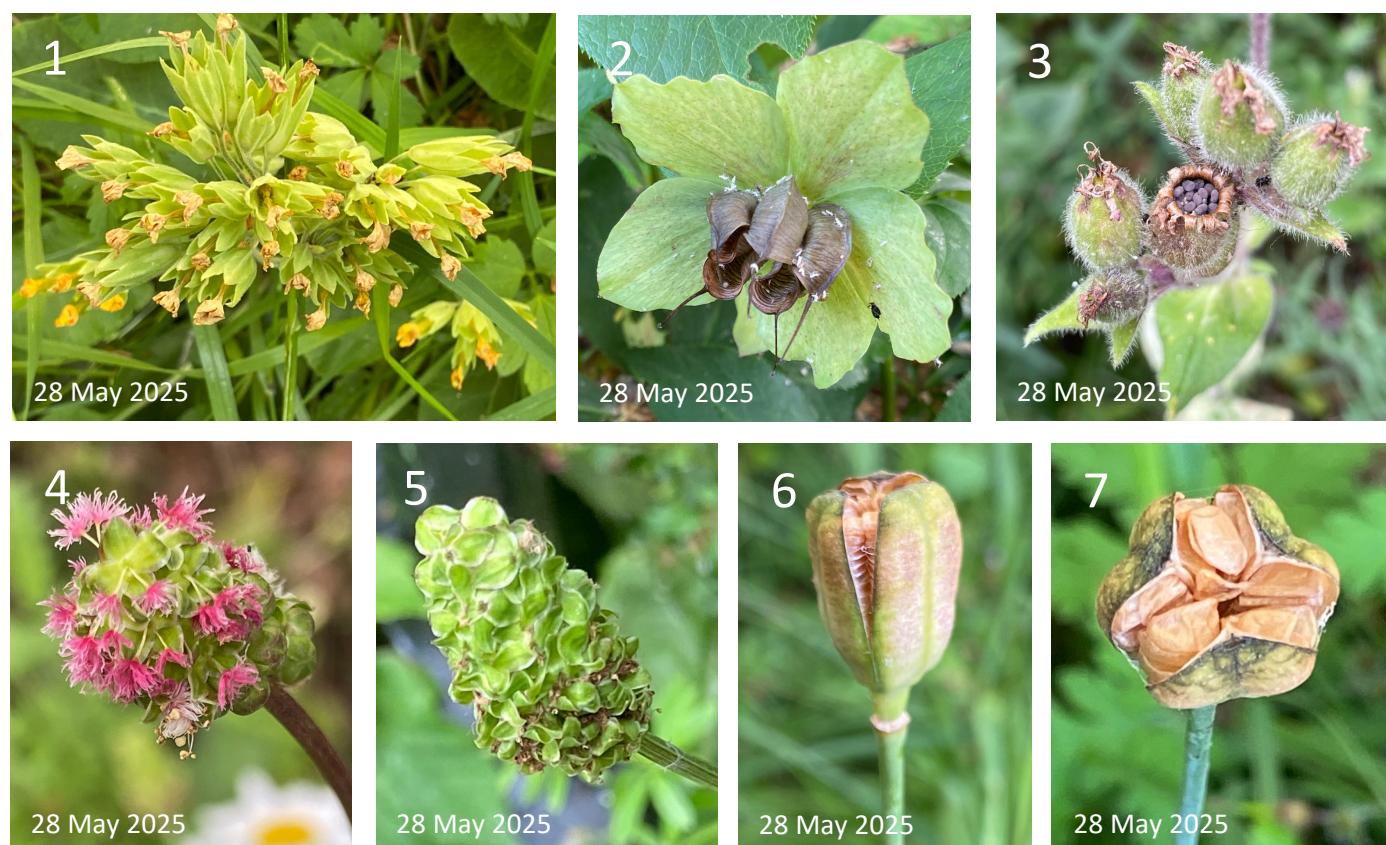
Spring is here again!



Glimpses of the Churchyard Garden

At this time of the year, the churchyard is beginning to get unruly! But out of this seeming chaos, Nature continues on its predetermined path.

The cowslips are now seeding (1), while the hellebores have already ejected the next generation of seeds (2). We are only in May but everywhere there are signs of autumn. Goblets full of red campion seeds can be seen (3); the feathery flowers of the burnet (4) are turning into seed heads (5). The fritillaries, too, are fruiting, their seedpods drying out and their seeds about to be released (6,7).



There are also new arrivals. Erigerons (8) are emerging in the path beside the church, facing Bridge's patisserie, joining hart's tongue fern on the steps leading to the basement (9). Other wall dwelling plants such as yellow corydalis (10) and wall lettuce (11) are also making an appearance, joining the delicate lattices of wood avens (12,13) and robust swathes of creeping buttercup in the main churchyard (14).

Sumer is icumen in!

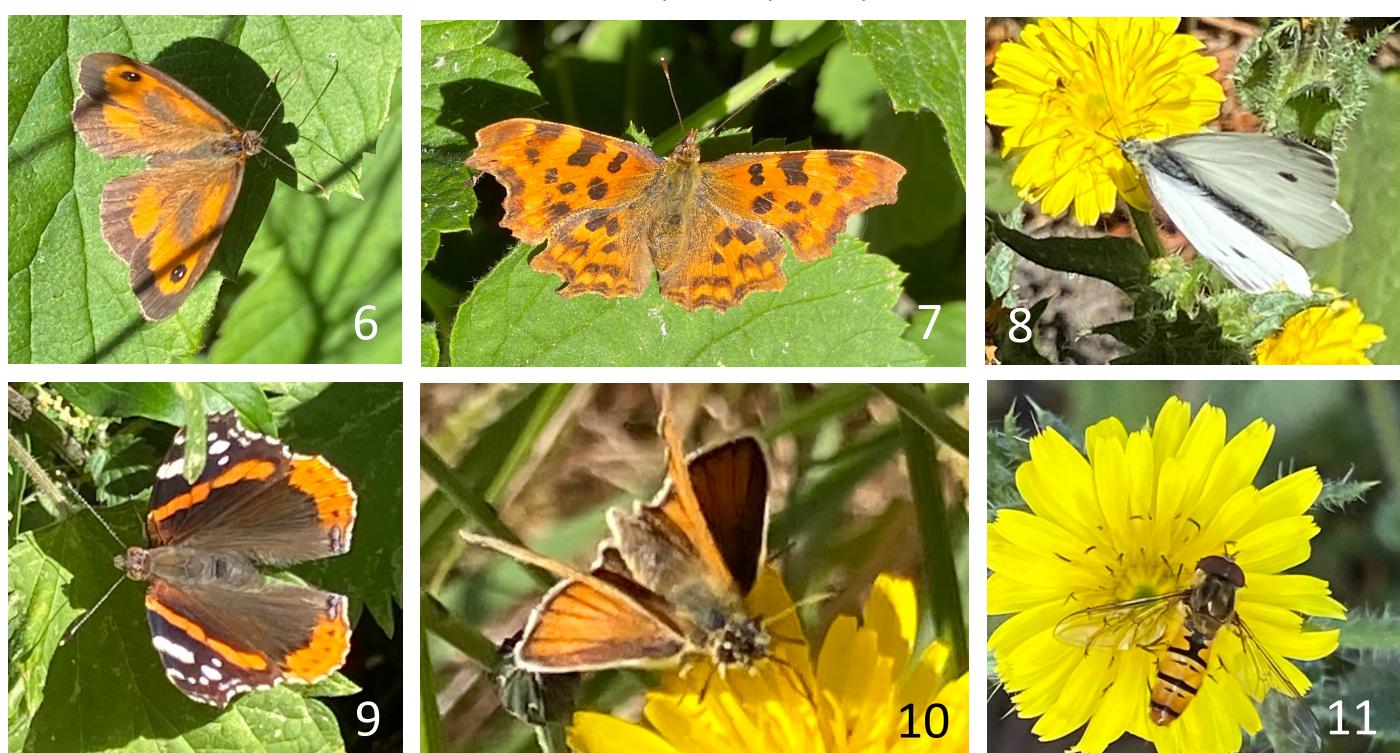


The churchyard is awash with insects. Hurrah! Most satisfying is the return of Cinnabar Moth caterpillars to the Ragwort in the lawn area (1), indicating the continuation of our Cinnabar colony. The annual arrival of the caterpillars usually accompanies the Churchyard Picnic, which we need to arrange!

Ragwort is toxic to livestock, due to the poisonous pyrrolizidine alkaloids it contains. But Cinnabar Moth caterpillars have evolved a mechanism for harmlessly sequestering these compounds within their bodies, thereby turning themselves into toxic timebombs and warding off predators. Ragwort plants provide a useful refuelling spot in the churchyard for insects such as the Western Honeybee (2), the Buff-tailed Bumblebee (3), various Ladybird beetles (4), and butterflies such as the Gatekeeper (5).



There's been a welcome influx of butterflies into the churchyard, with the Hedge Brown (6), the Comma (7), the Cabbage White (8), the Red Admiral (9), and the Essex Skipper (10) all making an appearance. But perhaps the most welcome insect of all is the Marmalade hoverfly (11), a prolific pollinator.



An impressive new arrival to the churchyard is the Common Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*). Not an indigenous plant, the hollyhock was imported from China as long ago as the 15th century. It is referred to as 'holyoke' by the herbalist William Turner in his Great Herbal of 1568. Here it is seen beside the railings in Portugal Place, with my 6-foot daughter Harriet serving as size comparison (12,13).

In last week's Newsletter, we heard how the Decottignies in their garden in Carlux in France, are using "permacultures" to integrate novel biodiversity into the garden and influence the natural equilibria occurring within it.

We have now initiated a small project to do something similar at St Clement's. We have propagated Yellow Rattle seeds derived locally from the National Trust at Wimpole Park and then transferred them as mature plants into the Spring garden facing Portugal Place (14). Yellow Rattle parasitises and weakens neighbouring grasses, effectively reducing the sward and enabling wildflowers to thrive. Our aim is to establish a Yellow Rattle permaculture to thwart the grass. The Yellow Rattle plants are now seeding (15)...

