SPRING

The year's at the spring,

And day's at the morn;

Morning's at seven;

The hillside's dew-pearled;

The lark's on the wing;

The snail's on the thorn;

God's in his Heaven –

All's right with the world!

From *Pippa Passes* by Robert Browning (1812–89).

MARCH

You can just see the wild primroses and violets, both surprise arrivals, which have been left to develop at the front of the border.

This is a month full of contradictions. One day can be perishingly cold, with driving sleet and howling gales, while the next can be reassuringly warm and sunny, an encouragement to the spring flowers, and the 'weeds' of course, to raise their heads and open their petals. Today is the 19th: the sky is overcast and gloomy, and there is a finger-freezing breeze. Yet, as I look back to last year's diary, I read that this same date was like summer, with the sweet perfume of daffodils on the air,

the sound of tennis rackets batting a ball next door and laughter and idle chat drifting over the hedge. This year, however, the weatherman tells us that more snow is on the way.

Despite its wintery aspects, March was the first month of ten in the very earliest Roman calendar. This seemed a good enough reason to begin this book with the same month. It was named after Martius, the god of war, and indicated the start of the season for both warfare and farming. Sometimes this month seems to be truly war-like in character, with strong gales bending the trees almost to breaking point. No one captures this characteristic better than American poet and educator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82):

> I Martius am! Once first, and now the third!
> To lead the Year was my appointed place;
> A mortal dispossessed me by a word,
> And set there Janus with the double face.
> Hence I make war on all the human race;
> I shake the cities with my hurricanes;
> I flood the rivers and their banks efface,
> And drown the farms and hamlets with my rains.

'March' from *The Poet's Calendar* (1882)

Despite these sometimes violent outbreaks, the month nevertheless offers hope for new beginnings with the birds already busy with nest-building. A tiny wren has taken up residence in our carport, well sheltered from the March winds, and is remaking the old mud nest of a swallow. Each day a little more moss is added to the sides and top, thus creating a snug round home. We look forward to the arrival of the babies.

The 'weeds' that appear this month are as mixed as the weather. Some we welcome gladly as they brighten our patch, but others we decide have no place in our garden and will have to go. My husband has started regular hoeing of the allotment as he wants to avoid any competition with the vegetables in order to give them the best of the nutrients and light and air.

Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna*)

Buttercup family (Ranunculaceae). Perennial. Pollinated by flies, beetles and bumble bees. Propagated by tuber, bulbil and seed. Mildly toxic and irritant.

This humble little plant, often despised by gardeners, was greatly admired by the poet William Wordsworth. *Photo © H D Loxdale*

What could be more joyful than this messenger of spring as it opens its gleaming yellow petals towards the first warm sunshine of the year! In the late 18th century, Gilbert White recorded it in flower in his Hampshire village as early as 21st February, although in our East Anglian garden we have to wait a little longer. The name 'celandine' comes from the Latin for swallow, *chelidonia*, referring to the arrival of this bird from warmer places. However, in the UK we do not generally see swallows until the end of April. There seems to have been some confusion with another, unrelated plant, the greater celandine, which flowers later in the year.

Its former scientific name was *Ranunculus ficaria*, denoting its relationship to the buttercup. *Rana* is the Latin for frog, perhaps indicating that this genus thrives in damp places, on pond or ditch banks, in low-lying meadows or shady woodland. It is certainly quite content on our damp clay, especially wherever I have been turning over the soil in the borders.

Ficaria stems from *ficus*, the Latin for fig, because of the knobbly tuberous roots that are thought to resemble this fruit. Lesser celandine can spread very rapidly via its tiny 'bulbils', rather than by seed, which form at the leaf axils, quickly creating new plants. Dark green carpets of the low-growing, shiny, heart-shaped leaves can soon colonise favourable situations. If you really do not want so many, then a dressing of ash, either wood or coal, can discourage their proliferation.

The starry, golden-yellow flowers may have any number of petals between seven and twelve, each of which is backed by three sepals. The colour fades to white as the flower ages. In the centre are many stamens. The petals have the knack of closing up just before the arrival of rain and, as they are greenish on the underside, seem to disappear. At the end of the flowering season the vanishing act is complete as the plant dies back. During winter, energy is stored underground in the tuberous roots.

Folklore

In former times it seems that the bulbils attached to the roots of celandine were associated with the teats of cows. For this reason, farmers used to hang the roots in the byre in the hope that the cows would thereby produce creamier milk and more of it.

The lesser celandine emerges every now and again in English literature. Indeed, this modest little plant seems to have captured the imaginations of several writers. As far as William Wordsworth is concerned, it is widely assumed that the daffodil was his favourite bloom, because his poem about this flower is so well known. However, it was the unassuming lesser celandine that he most admired.

> There's a flower that shall be mine,
> 'Tis the little celandine.
>
> From *To the Small Celandine*

After his death a celandine was inscribed on to his tombstone, but unfortunately the artist depicted the wrong one, the greater celandine which is related to the poppy!

Wordsworth wrote three poems about the lesser celandine. 'The Small Celandine' is particularly charming as it gives a true picture of its special characteristics. The opening verse refers to its canny ability to respond to the weather:

> There is a flower, the lesser celandine,
> That shrinks, like many more, from cold and rain;
> And the first moment that the sun may shine,
> Bright as the sun itself, 'tis out again!

This glowing little flower is not just restricted to poetry. D.H. Lawrence's main character in his novel *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel, has a special feeling for these 'scalloped splashes of gold', perhaps reflecting the writer's own regard for the flower. He particularly likes them 'when their petals go flat back with the sunshine' and the way in which they 'seem to be pressing themselves at the sun'.

Uses

A very long-standing common name for lesser celandine is the somewhat unlovely 'pilewort' on account of its traditional usage as a remedy for haemorrhoids. The visual similarity between the knobbly tubers of the plant and this uncomfortable condition doubtlessly prompted herbalists to prescribe it, in line with the Doctrine of Signatures. This theory was proposed by Paracelsus in the 16th century in which he states that each plant gives us a sign of its medicinal use that can be 'read' by a physician. There may be a resemblance with a part of the human body needing to be

healed or, alternatively, with the symptoms of a specific disease which it might cure. Amazingly, lesser celandine really does contain therapeutic properties helpful in the curing of piles: the saponins are naturally anti-haemorrhoidal and the tannins enhance this effect. No doubt, herbalists combined the ideas of the Doctrine of Signatures with their own practical knowledge. Nicholas Culpeper (1616–64), an English botanist, herbalist, physician and astrologer, says that 'it is certain by good experience that the decoction of the leaves and root doth wonderfully help piles and haemorrhoids'. Herbalists may still prescribe it in the form of an ointment for topical application.

The plant needs to be used with care, however, as it contains a toxin, protoanemonin, but when dried or heated the poisonous effect is nullified. Despite this, the raw young leaves were eaten as a prevention against scurvy. The German name is *Scharbockskraut*, which means scurvy herb. It is now known that the leaves are rich in vitamin C. It seems that the toxin becomes increasingly potent as the plant matures, so newly emerging leaves are relatively safe.

Wildlife

Like the nectar of other early blooms, this can be a life-saver for bees and other insects when there is so little nourishment available. In particular the red-tailed and buff-tailed bumble bees benefit, along with various flies and beetles. Although pollinated in this way, the seeds rarely set. The plant relies rather on its creeping tubers and bulbils for propagation, which can cause it to be invasive. For this reason gardeners tend to want to eradicate it. Please think again and consider allowing it to flourish in a spare patch where it can easily be restricted.