



BULB LOG 09.....2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022



Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'

## Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'

Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' is a miniature reticulate Iris hybrid that is widely available in the trade, largely because of the speed of increase that is possible from a single bulb: an increase that has both positive and negative consequences. Within a few years a single bulb will increase to form a clump of several flowers such as these and especially the group on the left.



I find such clumps of **Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'** unattractive because the beauty of the colour shape and form of the individual flowers cannot display freely to be fully appreciated.



**Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'**

It does not take long for such clumps of Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' to form which if left unchecked is detrimental to both the long term vigour and flowering of the bulbs as well the aesthetic qualities. I wrote recently about how the gardener becomes the friend of bulbs that form clumps and now is time for action.



Now I come to the question of the best time to lift and divide bulbs including Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' and the simple answer must be when the bulbs are in their summer dormancy because then you will not interrupt the growing cycle nor do damage to the growth. But in a garden this becomes a more complex question because the gardener has to take other factors into account. If I were to lift these iris when they go dormant in summer I would do damage to the many other plants that share this space, so I have to consider when is the time I can do minimum damage to all the surrounding plants. Like many bulbs the first roots form in the late summer/early autumn when the rains arrive but they will not grow to their full extent until the leaves start to grow which in this case is after the flowering cycle.



So I can carefully lift, divide, replant and water these bulbs with minimal damage to the roots knowing that they will be able to grow on better without the intensive competition.

I replanted three bulbs spaced out back into the same place taking care to water them in well to both support the plant and importantly to wash the soil into good contact with the roots.



After replanting the three bulbs I still had all these from that same congested clump to plant out.



This picture shows the roots have experienced little if any damage so the plants will grow on well and should flower again next year but also note the small bulbils forming around the bottom of the bulbs many of which have fallen off and can be seen amongst the soil. These bulbils are what make this plant so prolific enabling it to be easily clonally increased which has resulted in it becoming so widely available.



This clump of Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' has many nonflowering shoots that will greatly benefit from being given more space to grow in without all that competition.



Iris 'Sheila Ann Germany' is a less prolific sister seedling of 'Katharine Hodgkin', apparently raised from the same seed capsule, but here is a warning – look at the darker blue streaks especially obvious on the upward pointing parts of this flower these are signs that it is virussed. Many of the plants and pictures I see of Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin' and related plants are virussed and indeed it is a plant that is robust enough to tolerate and survive with the virus but you may be growing other plants that can catch the infection which cannot survive with the virus. Our stocks of these plants are clean and we rigorously remove any that show signs of the virus.



Splitting these clumps has given me many more single flowers to plant out across the rock garden bed and beyond.



And so I have three answers to when is the best time to split up clumps of bulbs.

- 1 The best time for the bulb – when it is dormant in summer.
- 2 The best time for the garden - when you will do minimum damage to all the plants growing in the space.
- 3 The best time for the gardener – when they remember.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> is well put by Panayoti Kelaidis in the latest NARGS journal where in his article ‘Ten Plants and Ten



Lessons’ he writes of *Allium douglasii* “Year after year it gradually expanded and I wondered: should I divide it in the spring or wait until it goes dormant in the fall? I put it off, the clump got bigger, until one spring it wasn’t there” Many of us have a similar experience so perhaps the best time to divide a plant is when you remember and have the time - yes you may do some damage but the harm of doing nothing may be greater. To that end - for a number of seasons I have been meaning to divide this clump of snowdrops.





It is not the ideal time to disturb the bulb in full growth but as you will see below the bulbs are very congested stacked up beside and on top of each other so I carefully lift the clump removing around two thirds of the bulbs while leaving one side relatively undisturbed for now.



I gently pulled small bundles of bulbs away from the congested mass minimising the damage to the roots before planting them around in small groups, then followed the all-important watering them in well.



You would hardly know that I had been there once I had back filled the hole with fresh soil and watered what was left of that clump. In the summer I will lift what remains of the clump replanting the bulbs spaced out into the fresh backfilled soil.



As it is now officially spring I spend most time exploring the garden enjoying the pockets of flowers that don't wait for the arrival of spring as well as searching out the first signs of shoots as the rest of the garden wakes up.



This group of Snowdrops includes (on the right) 'Elizabeth Harrison' a lovely yellow form of *Galanthus woronowii*.



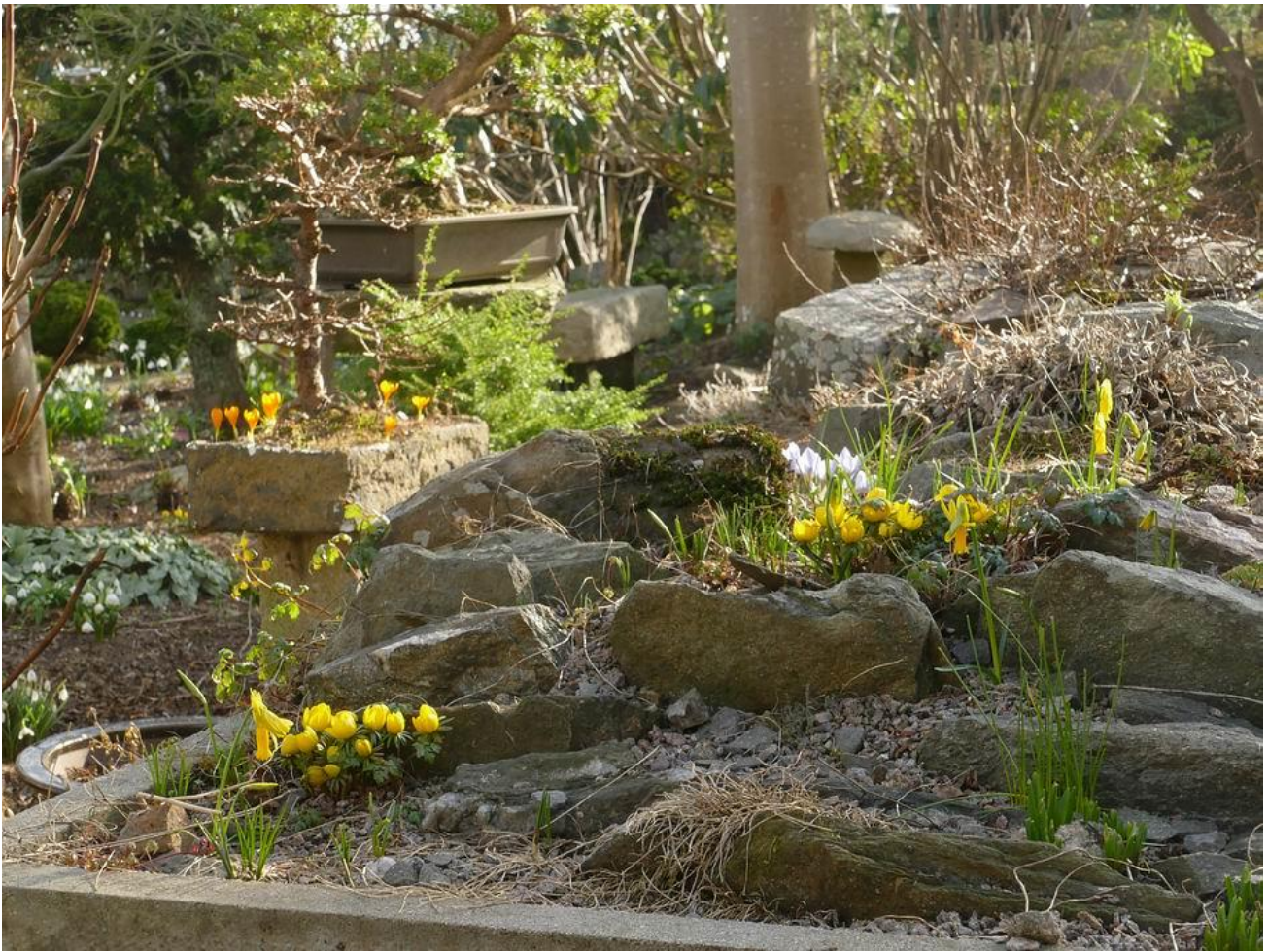
Yellow snowdrops are spread around the garden where they contrast with the more typical green marked forms. I have to explore the garden because of the way it has evolved - our sometimes chaotic intuitive plantings alongside those of nature, our tutor, who works in a similar way. That combination of no labels or formal record, other than a visual one of the plantings, along with the self-seeding means the garden is full of surprises especially at this time of year.



The garden is art and there is art in the garden as I get a bit creative with the camera while adding to my extensive visual record.



The planting in our cobble bed near the house is a small scale preview to the plants across the wider garden and acts as a visual link as the eye scans, spotting the same colours in the beds beyond which encourages exploration.



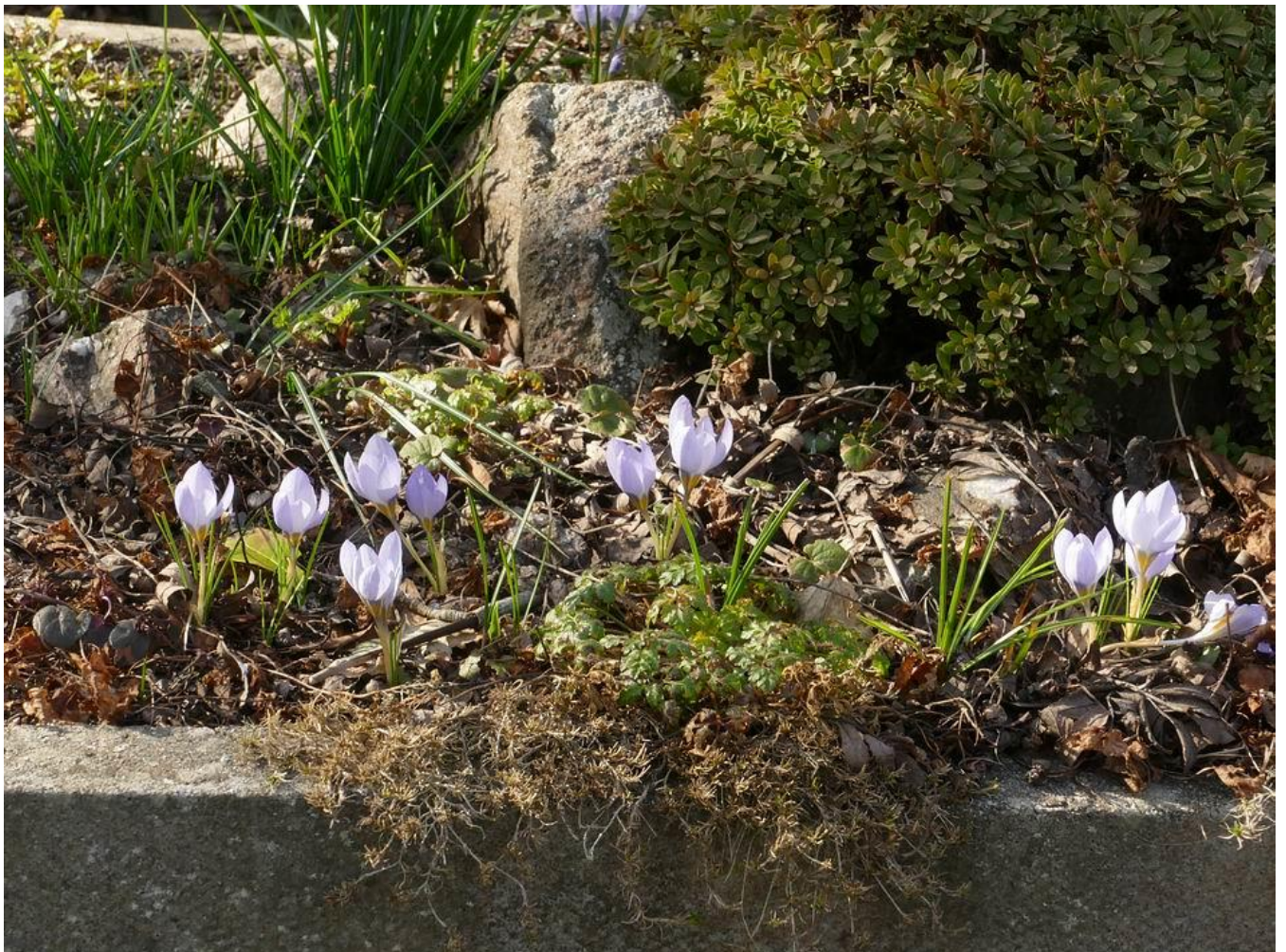
Colour is once again returning to the raised slab beds where Crocus, Eranthis and Narcissus are flowering.



**Narcissus cyclamineus and Crocus abantensis**



**Crocus abantensis**



**Crocus abantensis**



Similar plantings are repeated in various habitats around the garden with **Eranthis hyemalis** spreading by seed and **Crocus thirkianus** spreads its tiny corms around by stolons.





***Eranthis hyemalis***







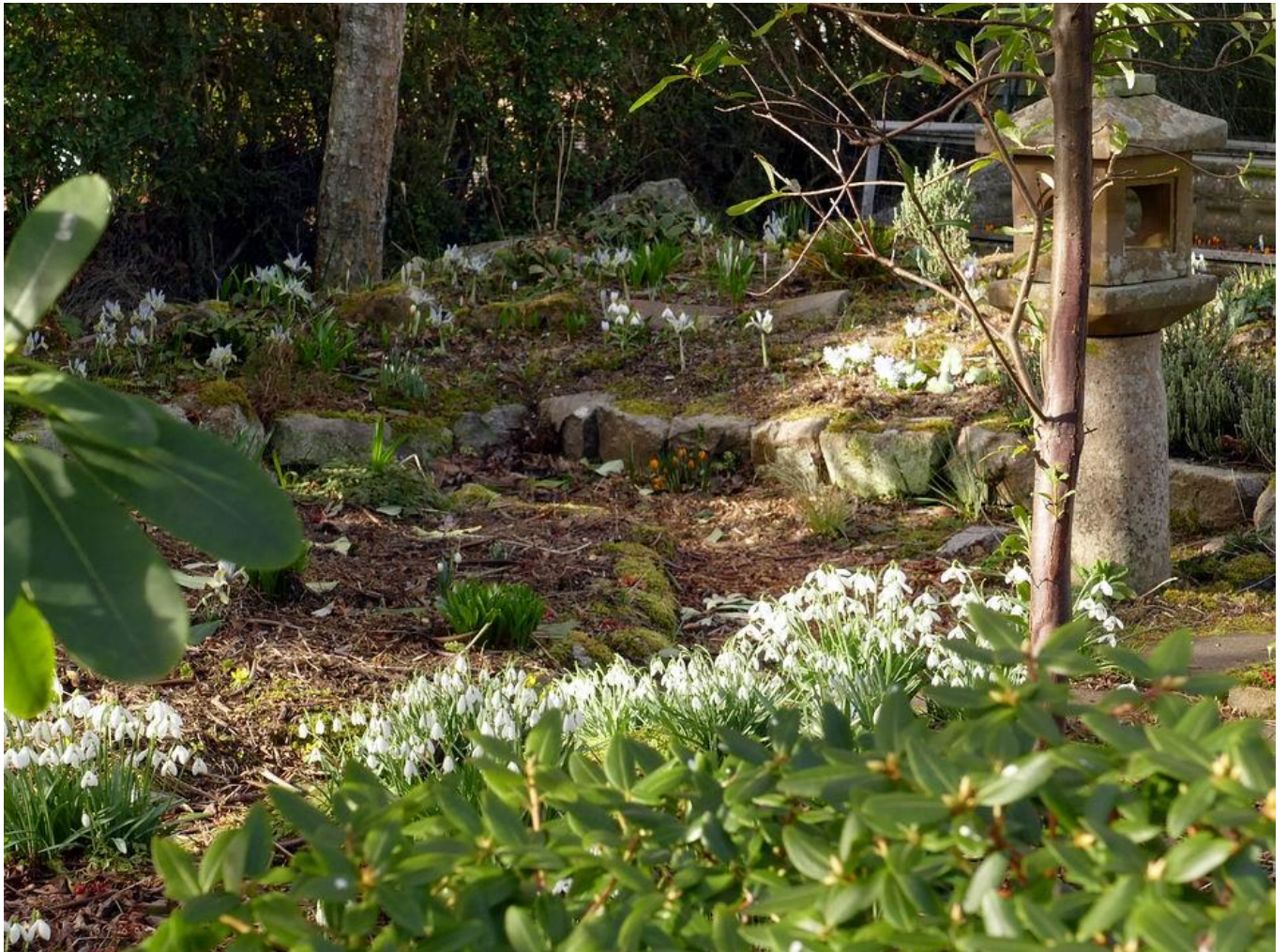
**Crocus chrysanthus hybrids**

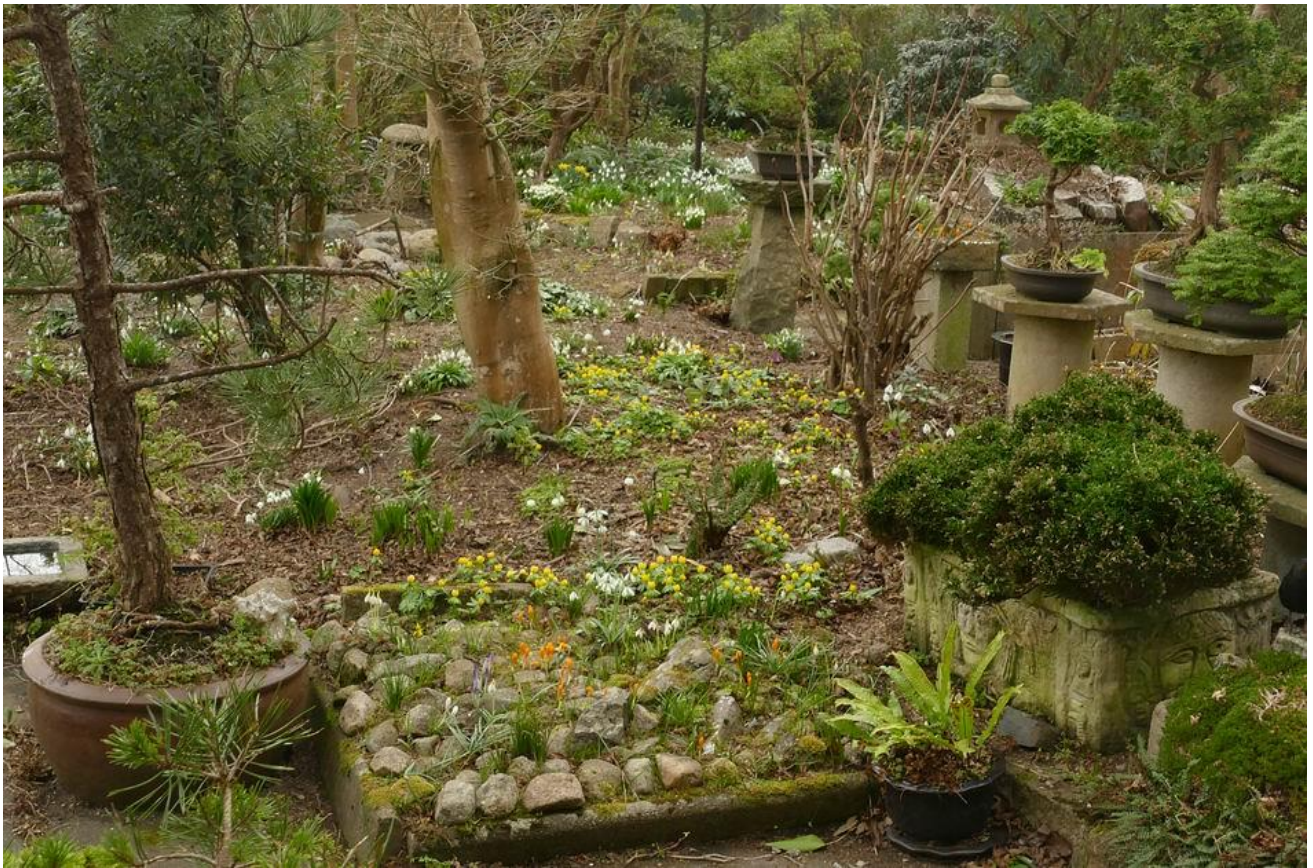


**Crocus atticus**



As spring advances the scene is rapidly changing.





**Cobble bed and beyond.**



As I finish off this Log on 01/02/22 it is the first day of spring, the sun is alone in the clear blue sky bathing the garden in its warmth and energy which has encouraged the flowers to open bringing a further explosion of colourful flowers.....