

Arum italicum

Bob Brown

Wonderful wintergreen foliage! At this time of the year some people become obsessed by snowdrops; for me it's *Arum italicum*. I endlessly seek new variants and being a nurseryman, if they are distinct enough, I name them, mark precisely where they are and lift them when dormant in summer to propagate and sell.

The species puts up new foliage in October that lasts till May, when it dies down. The term wintergreen is very appropriate. In frosty weather, the leaves bend to the ground but recover immediately the frost has melted. The leaves are dark green and hastate - that is, arrow-shaped - and grow to about 30cm long by 30cm high, although it takes a few years for the plant to produce leaves this big. When picked, the leaves last very well in water and have sufficient depth of colour and lack of yellow-greenness to set off well everything else in the vase. The plant will grow anywhere - even in the dry rooty shade under yew and beech trees, although, if grown in very dark places, the leaf patterning reduces. The tall, wide, pale green arum flowers appear in April and set vermilion seed heads that grace the garden from August to October. Despite its name, *Arum italicum* is a British native plant. I have seen it in woods on the Isle of Wight.

What really entrances me is the leaf patterning. It can be a winter glory. Left to its own devices the plants self-seed. Seedlings are always plain green but by the time they are three years old any leaf patterning they have will be properly visible.

I have several variants on the nursery - 'White Winter' (from Stephen Taffler) is not one of Stephen's best selections. The foliage has narrow white markings that follow the veins. I have a poor form I bought from Bressingham in 1990 called 'Marmoratum' which is almost as plain as the straight species with only faint paler green marbling randomly scattered across the leaves. It certainly is not what it now recognised as 'Marmoratum'.

I have 'Pictum', which should now be called 'Marmoratum', with good broad whitish-green veining. This I was given (dug-up, free!) on a visit to Avon Bulbs in 1985 before the company moved.

Two wild-collected selections were sent to me by Edwin Fenwick - 'Sappho' with a thin red edge to the leaf and thin yellowish veining, and 'Castle Brissac' with broad rounded leaves with angular pale silvery-green markings.

'Chameleon' is listed in the Plant Finder as a hybrid without a species. I argue it is the same basic plant as all the others - *Arum italicum subsp.italicum* because I have watched the mutation occur and separated the rhizomes. Whatever!..... What really matters is the distinctive rounded foliage that is almost entirely covered in pale green and is very good. The marking is caused by a separation of the outer layer of cells on the surface of the leaf and, in the right conditions, you can see condensation within the leaf!

'Da Rocha' came from Mr. da Rocha in Groningen and has large hastate leaves with the same markings as *Arum italicum* 'Chameleon'.

Self-sown nursery seedlings have produced good new varieties. I used to rate highest "good marked form" which has never acquired a cultivar name. In it the wide creamy-green veining randomly covers the areas between the veins making some leaves almost entirely this colour (apart from the edge which is always dark green). One particularly well-marked form I've named too quickly 'Uniquity'. Since then I've been given a form from Margaret Owen's garden where the pale veining has almost entirely amalgamated and bled in places beyond the dark green edge. 'Sparkler' has broken cream leaf venation on dark foliage giving a sparkling effect - 8/10. A form with markings almost as good as "good marked form" has (I think) hybridised with *Arum maculatum*, which grows wild around the edges of the nursery, to produce black spots and wide creamy-green veins. This is so like one I bought from Holland called 'Spotted Jack' that I have subsumed it under this name.

All of the leaf markings above are caused (I believe) by the separation of layers within the thickness of the leaves or patches of dark pigment on the outer layer that produces the spots. One last form is very different because it has layers lacking chlorophyll and is in this respect more like normal variegation. This is *Arum italicum subsp. neglectum* 'Miss Janey Hall' given me by Peter Hall and named for his niece/daughter. In it, the leaves have random creamy-yellow speckled variegation and have delightful even broader green and cream flowers.

How I love the winter.