

the guardian

# WEEKEND

11.03.06

**WHO'S  
DESPERATE  
NOW?  
THE  
LATE  
FLOWERING  
OF  
FELICITY  
HUFFMAN**

**PLUS  
MALE NUDES  
AUREEN DOWD  
HOW TO HAVE  
PERFECT DAY**







## THE PLANTSMAN

Andy Sturgeon

In my small patch of woodland the year starts with pure white snowdrops pushing up through the patterned leaves of the autumn-flowering *Cyclamen hederifolium* and the almost black grassy clumps of *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens'. I moved this curious plant here a few years ago and, although it seems too sunless for the pale purplish flowers, the leaves are still quite happy.

At this time of year, everything happens very fast beneath the shade of trees and shrubs. Wood anemones, ferns and the like are engaged in something of a race, desperately trying to flower or leaf up before their taller neighbours steal the light. These carpeting woodland plants are often termed "ground cover" which, given their beauty, seems something of an injustice.

Right now, the dogtooth violet,

*Erythronium* 'Pagoda', is coming fast to make neat clumps of shiny green leaves that will be followed by yellow nodding flowers on stalks a little more than 30cm high. These bulbous perennials seem to benefit enormously from a healthy dose of leaf mould, which I normally put down after they have flowered, as by then I can see where everything is.

Similar conditions are preferred by their neighbours; clumps of the fern-leaved *Corydalis flexuosa* with curious tubular flowers in meconopsis blue. In drier soils, the leaf mould is vital to retain moisture around the fleshy roots or the plants will just sit there looking disgruntled. Even when they are happy, you need to lift, divide and replant or you will end up parting company sooner

**Trip the light: *Anemone nemorosa* (above) has started its spring race**

than you would like. Somehow they still seem worth the bother.

The ground here has been alive for weeks – that's why it's important to tidy up withered fern fronds and fallen leaves in the early part of winter. At the same time, remove the leaves of *Helleborus x hybridus* and, along with them, the ugly blackspot that blights them. If you leave this tidy-up too late, it becomes impossible to do without stomping on soft new shoots.

These emerging shoots have their own character and beauty; the soft green fleshy shoots of *Dicentra spectabilis* 'Alba', for instance, are lighter than the pink flowered form and can be used to punctuate a carpet of spotted *Pulmonaria* leaves. Over the coming weeks they will pump up and unfurl over the variegated lungwort leaves that will bring light to this shady corner later in the year.