

Early Spring wildflowers in Milton Keynes
By Mike LeRoy

Which spring flowers can you expect to see during March? How about letting MKNHS website Sightings know when and where you see the first of each of these come into flower and include photos too: sightings@mknhs.org.uk

Early Spring flowers of woodlands, hedges and beside paths

In our three ancient woodlands within the City – Linford Wood, Howe Park Wood and Shenley Wood – the Spring ground flora have started to come into flower.

Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*

One of the earliest Spring flowers to emerge is Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis* which began to flower here in February. Although there are extensive lines of it alongside woodland paths and dense swathes of it on the woodland floor, it tends to be overlooked because its flowers are unobtrusive and it is only the dense patches of dark green leaves that stand out. It is worth a closer look because the male and female flowers are not on the same plant ('dioecious'). If you search for Dog's Mercury online on the wildflowerfinder.org.uk website you will find a sequence of photos: of the male flower opening up and on separate stems the female flower, part-hidden by leaves. Dog's Mercury also spreads vigorously by rhizomes, and it can compete for space with Bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, which come into flower later. Dog's Mercury is poisonous and amongst other effects is an emetic. Some dog-owners seem to think that the flower's name is because dogs like it, which is not why some wildflowers have 'dog' as part of their common name. Even so, some dogs are said to seek it out and eat it.

Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa*

A later arrival in March is the Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa*. It's 'show' can be almost as impressive as that of Bluebells. There are path edges in Linford Wood where it covers the ditch edges and spreads into the woodland. The flower is a star-like spread of six (or more) brilliant white petals, with perhaps a light splash of pink. This too spreads by creeping rhizomes.

Primrose *Primula vulgaris*

Another that flowers mainly in March is Primrose *Primula vulgaris*. Although we tend to see cultivars of these first on the banks of some of the grid-roads (such as V8 alongside Fishermead) it is also an ancient woodland flower. Small clumps of these in woodlands can stay in flower through to June. But notice the differences between Primrose *Primula vulgaris* and Cowslip *Primula veris* (which tends to flower in April) and beware that there is a hybrid of these two around as well, *Primula x polyantha* = False Oxlip, often as a garden escape. The *Primula* family can be even more confusing locally because there are planted Oxlip *Primula elatior* at Woolstone and these have led to another hybrid in that area, *Primula x digenea*. Oxlip is largely found in the wild in Essex and Suffolk.

Dog-violets

Two dog-violets in particular are found in our ancient woodlands, also by hedges and paths and amongst shrubs elsewhere in MK. Violets are small flowers, soon hidden on the woodland floor by later-flowering plants, so a 10x lens is useful for identification. They are: Early Dog-Violet *Viola reichenbachiana* and Common Dog-Violet *Viola riviniana*. You can find an identification aid for these and two other violets on wildflowerhouruk.weebly.com under [dinkymoira](#). You should find a page there, illustrating the differences between each of these. Early Dog-Violet *Viola reichenbachiana* has rather narrow upper petals that do not overlap, the veins on its lower petal don't tend to branch much, and the spur at the back of the flower is un-notched. Unfortunately Common Dog-Violet *Viola riviniana* can be rather variable in appearance, depending on what habitat it is in. But look out for its broad overlapping violet coloured petals, the much-branched veins on the lower petal, and the pale-coloured spur at the back of the flower, and the notch in this. Both of these flowers have pointy green sepals below the petals. Do let MKNHS Sightings know when you see these dog-violets coming into flower and where.

Early Spring flowers of grid-road trees, waysides and grasslands

Our grid-roads have a sequence of white-flowered trees and the first is not **Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa***: it is **Cherry Plum *Prunus cerasifera***. The Development Corporation landscapers knew what they were doing: they planted a sequence, with Cherry Plum flowering from early March and Blackthorn following a few weeks later, followed by the two – more pinky – hawthorns in April and May: **Midland Hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata*** and **Common Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna***. The Cherry Plum is also known as Myrobalan Plum. It was introduced but is widely naturalised in the UK. With the Cherry Plum the flowers emerge at the same time as the leaves, but on Blackthorn the flowers appear before the leaves. The Blackthorn has many, long, sharp thorns on its grey-brown twigs, but the Cherry Plum has glossy green twigs that are often spineless. There are many other horticultural plum and cherry varieties of tree elsewhere in MK, but also the native Wild Cherry or Gean *Prunus avium*, sometimes found in woodlands.

Lesser Celandine *Ranunculus ficaria*

There is another March arrival: the bright yellow flowers of Lesser Celandine *Ranunculus ficaria* stand out, and are often in small groups. They have at least eight quite narrow but long petals, each flower on a long stalk, with long-stalked leaves arising around it from the base of the plant. Early Lesser Celandine have been seen in flower already in Great Linford and on Bradwell Common.

Speedwells and other flowers

Another group of tiny flowers that have been flowering for a while are the *Veronica* family, Speedwells. I have Speedwells in my lawn and they are found in other grasslands. Dinkymoira has an identification page for some of these too at: wildflowerhouruk.weebly.com – look under resources/dinkymoira. You will find it lower left, below a Violet. Other plants coming into flower locally in March include: Garlic Mustard *Alliaria petiolata* and Ground Ivy *Glechoma hederacea*. You may see these at woodland margins, by hedges, on waste ground and in gardens.