



UNVEILING THE WINTER JEWELS

GALANTHUS, LEUCOJUM, ACIS & COMPANION PLANTS
FOR A HIGHVELD SETTING

BY MATT PRINSLOO



Introduction:

We often associate vibrant blooms with the warmth of summer, don't we? But what if I told you that some of nature's most exquisite beauty emerges when our gardens are often at their quietest, whispering the promise of spring even in the depths of winter? And for those of us gardening here in Johannesburg, aren't we always looking for unique plants that can thrive despite our unique climate challenges on the Highveld?

Galanthus (Snowdrops) - The Early Birds

Let's start with *Galanthus*, more commonly known as snowdrops. These are perhaps the most famous of the three, renowned for their early bloom, often pushing through snow.

Key Identifying Features:

Typically single, nodding, bell-shaped flowers with three larger outer petals and three smaller inner petals, often marked with green on the tips. Very delicate and graceful.

Native Range:

Primarily Europe and the Near East, from the Pyrenees across to the Caucasus mountains. Think deciduous woodlands, alpine meadows, and riverbanks.

Leucojum (Snowflakes) - The Robust Cousins

Leucojum are known as snowflakes. While similar in appearance to snowdrops, they are generally larger and more robust plants.

Key Identifying Features:

Their flowers are also bell-shaped, but all six petals (tepals) are of equal length and are usually marked with a distinct green or sometimes yellow spot at the tip of each petal. They often have multiple flowers per stem.

Native Range:

Wider distribution across Europe, North Africa, and parts of the Middle East, often in damp meadows, open woodlands, and along streams.

Acis (Snowflakes) - The Lesser-Known Relatives

Finally, we have *Acis*. This genus was historically part of *Leucojum* but was separated due to genetic differences and specific morphological traits. They are perhaps the least known of the three, but no less charming.

Key Identifying Features:

Flowers are typically smaller and more open, often nodding, with petals of equal length. Many species bloom later than *Galanthus* or *Leucojum*, with some even flowering in summer, hence the name 'Summer Snowflakes' for some species.

Native Range:

Primarily Western Mediterranean (Spain, Portugal, North Africa), but also some species in central Europe and the Balkans. They often prefer drier, rocky, or woodland edges.

Native Conditions and What They Tell Us

Galanthus's Home:

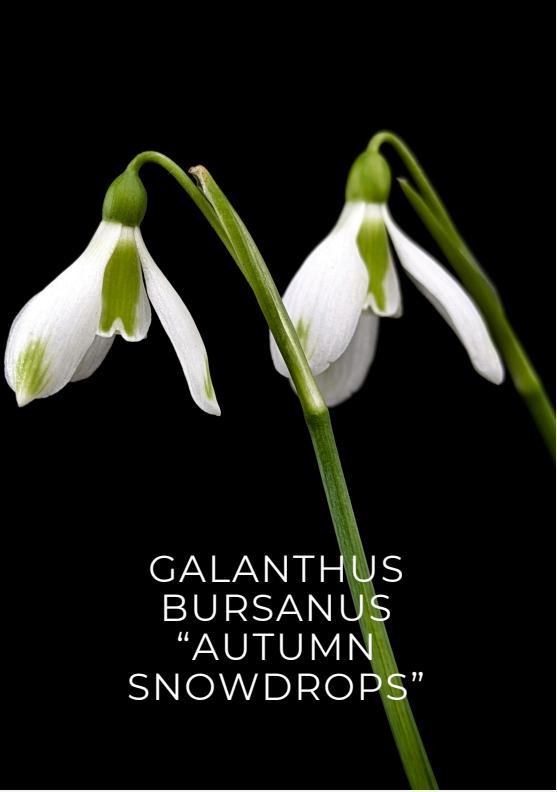
Think of *Galanthus* pushing through a light blanket of snow in a European woodland. They thrive in rich, well-drained but consistently moist soil, high in organic matter. Winter chill is crucial for their flowering, and summer dormancy is key. They appreciate the cool, shaded conditions provided by deciduous trees in summer.

Leucojum's Habitat:

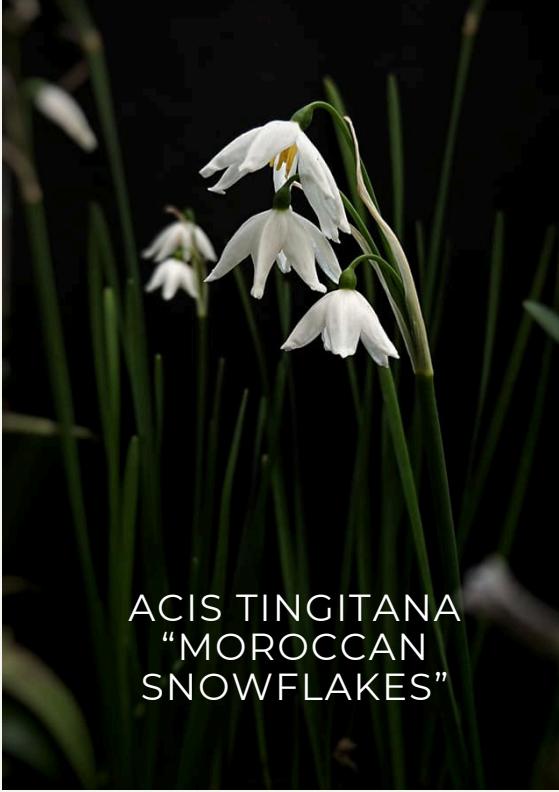
Leucojum species are a bit more adaptable, often found in damp meadows, stream banks, and open woodlands. They can tolerate slightly heavier soils and more sun than *Galanthus* in cooler climates, but still prefer consistent moisture during their growth period and a dry rest in summer. Some species are more tolerant of boggy conditions.

Acis's Preferences:

Acis species, particularly those from the Western Mediterranean, often prefer drier, more open, or even rocky habitats. They are generally more tolerant of heat and drought during their summer dormancy, which is a significant advantage for us in Johannesburg. Some bloom in spring, others remarkably in summer or autumn.



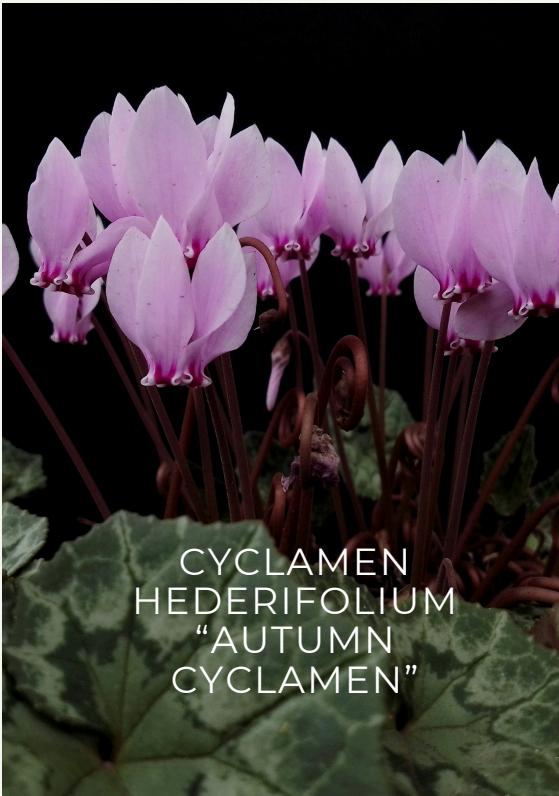
GALANTHUS
BURSANUS
“AUTUMN
SNOWDROPS”



ACIS TINGITANA
“MOROCCAN
SNOWFLAKES”



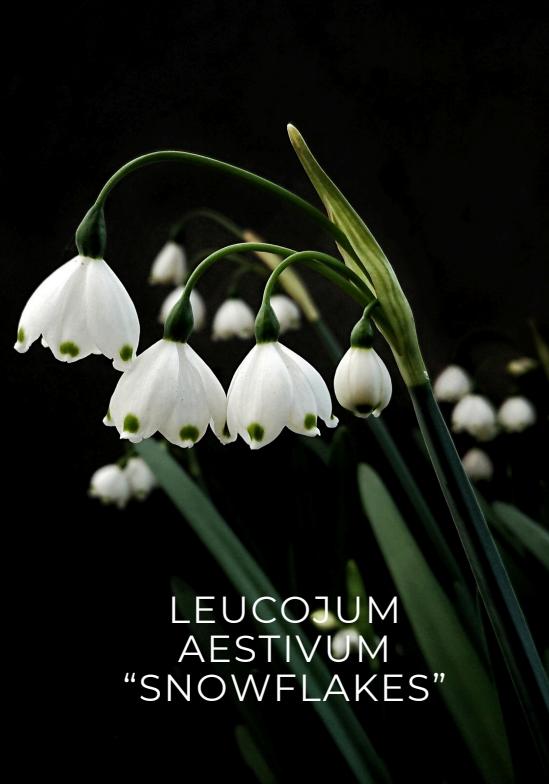
ACIS
AUTUMNALIS
“AUTUMN
SNOWFLAKES”



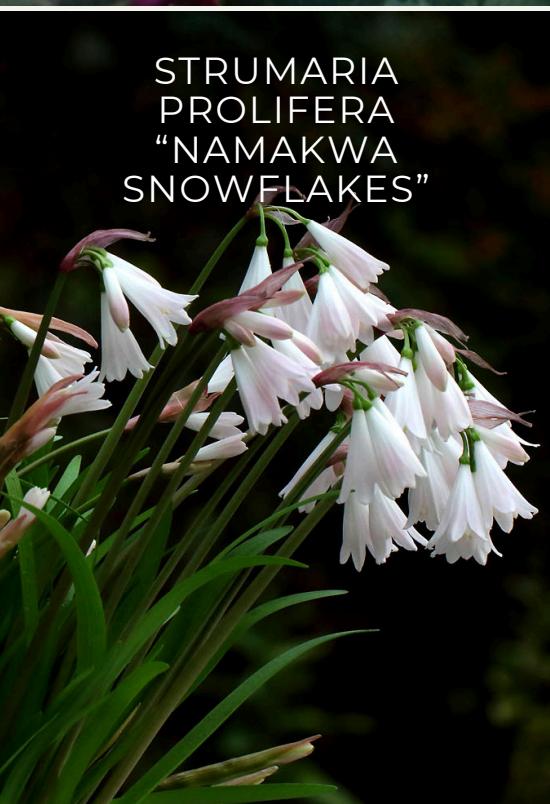
CYCLAMEN
HEDERIFOLIUM
“AUTUMN
CYCLAMEN”



CYCLAMEN COUM
“WINTER
CYCLAMEN”



LEUCOJUM
AESTIVUM
“SNOWFLAKES”



STRUMARIA
PROLIFERA
“NAMAKWA
SNOWFLAKES”



GALANTHUS
NIVALIS
“SNOWDROPS”

Cultivation in Johannesburg: Adapting to Our Climate

The Johannesburg Climate Challenge (and Opportunity!):

Our Highveld climate is very different from their native homes. We have hot, wet summers (our growing season for many plants), and dry, often cold but usually snow-free winters (their natural growing season). The key challenge is the summer heat and dryness for the species that prefer cool, moist summers, and providing sufficient winter chill.

However, the opportunity lies in selecting the right species and adapting our cultivation methods.

Soil Preparation - The Foundation of Success:

For all three, excellent drainage is non-negotiable. Our summer rains can be heavy, leading to rot if the soil is waterlogged. Amend heavy clay soils with plenty of compost, coarse grit, and perhaps some bark chips to improve drainage and aeration."

For Galanthus and Leucojum, also incorporate plenty of well-rotted leaf mould or compost to mimic their woodland soil conditions. They appreciate a slightly acidic to neutral pH.

Siting and Aspect - Mimicking Native Shade:

This is CRUCIAL. Avoid full sun in summer. Plant them where they receive morning sun and afternoon shade, or under deciduous trees. The trees provide the necessary winter light and summer shade and cooler roots. South-facing cooler aspect walls or large evergreen shrubs can also provide suitable conditions for afternoon shade.

For Acis, especially the more Mediterranean types, a slightly more open, sunnier spot might be tolerated, particularly if the soil drains extremely well.

Watering and Feeding - Timing is Everything:

Watering: During their active growth phase (late autumn through spring), ensure consistent moisture. This means supplementing our natural rainfall, especially if winter is dry. Once leaves start to yellow and die back (late spring/early summer), reduce watering drastically or stop entirely. They need a dry dormancy to prevent rot.

Feeding: A light feed of balanced, slow-release organic fertiliser in late autumn or early winter as they emerge is beneficial. Avoid high-nitrogen feeds.

Specific Tips for Johannesburg:

Bulb Source: Buy from reputable local nurseries or specialist bulb suppliers who can advise on suitability for our climate. Planting 'in the green' (after flowering but with leaves still attached) is often recommended for *Galanthus* if available, as they establish better.

Container Growing: For sensitive species or to provide more control, growing in pots is an excellent option. This allows you to move them to cooler, shadier spots in summer and ensure precise watering.

Mulching: A layer of organic mulch (leaf mould, bark chips) helps conserve moisture and keeps roots cool, especially in summer.

Embrace *Acis*: *Acis* species are often more tolerant of our climate due to their Mediterranean origins. *Acis autumnalis* (autumn snowflake) and *Acis nicaeensis* are good candidates to try.

Experimentation: Gardening is about experimentation! Start with a few bulbs, observe their performance, and adjust your approach. Don't be discouraged if some don't thrive initially.

Conclusion:

We've explored the subtle yet significant differences between *Galanthus*, *Leucojum*, and *Acis*. Understanding their origins & native conditions, & most importantly, we've armed ourselves with practical knowledge to cultivate these delightful winter & spring jewels right here in our Johannesburg gardens. Discovering the enchanting world of *Cyclamen*, particularly *Cyclamen coum*, as a perfect companion to extend winter magic.

They may require a little extra thought compared to some common bulbs, but the reward of seeing these flowers emerge, bringing beauty in the cooler months, is truly unparalleled. Is it worth the effort? I certainly think so!

