First Flowerings in 2021

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In the end, we probably grew a bit weary of recording first flowering dates (FFDs) – or maybe it was just me? Anyway, our attempt to keep track of spring in 2020 persisted surprisingly well into the autumn and winter, helped along by a second lockdown in November 2020 and then a *third* from January 2021 onwards. Our project had begun with the first Lords-and-Ladies (*Arum maculatum*) of 2020, so it seemed only right, in the end, that we should keep it going at least until the first Lords-and-Ladies of 2021. A full year, one complete circuit of the sun, and on the threshold of another spring about to unfold and unravel in its own particular way. But, at least for our group, this felt like the right time to stop – and a good moment to move on.

In early 2021 there were the occasional first-flowering alerts on the ever-lively SRPG WhatsApp Group, but for the most part records of FFDs in 2021 – especially those after the middle of March – were once again from the Taunton area and made by me. This was the continuation of an obsession that had begun in 2008 and still showed no sign of abating – despite curses from the rest of the family and the usual New Year's resolution to have a break to maybe do something different and more interesting. I could easily find something different to do – but more interesting? Really?

Results of the first flowerings project in 2020 had been posted on the SRPG website as they were written, and these were subsequently edited and published in last year's newsletter. A few additional reports were posted online covering the period October 2020 to February 2021, while *all* the pieces, right through to the end of March 2021, plus a lengthy introduction to the project, were later ironed out and stitched together as a stand-alone pdf 'exhibited' at the BSBI's (virtual) Annual Exhibition Meeting in November. I wouldn't want to force it on anyone, but if you'd like a copy you're very welcome to get in touch.

Turning now to spring 2021, here's a quick summary of the chief points of interest. The most immediately obvious thing was how different 2021 was to the spring of 2020. We had more frosts in January 2021 alone than in the first three months of 2020 put together; and then, in the second week of February we caught the western edge of a 'beast from the east', with sleet, hail and even snow on several days. Each cold snap seemed to stall spring's progress, and at least from mid-February onwards it became clear that spring was 'running late', with many FFDs one to two weeks behind the dates recorded in 2020. This can be seen in Fig. 1, which for 326 species compares FFDs in 2021 with those recorded in 2020. Species coming into flower later in 2021 than in 2020 are represented by dots *above* the diagonal line, while those with *earlier* FFDs have dots *below* the line. Overall, FFDs in 2021 were (on average) 11 days *later* than in 2020. A good example of a species with delayed onset of flowering in 2021 was Teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*) (Fig. 2), which in Taunton was nearly three weeks later than in 2020.

The 2021 FFDs can also be compared with average FFDs recorded for the decade 2008-17 (Fig. 3). As can be seen by comparing Fig. 3 with Fig. 1, the dots are now clustered much more closely to the diagonal line, indicating that dates for most species in 2021 were not that far away from their decadal averages: overall, they were (on average) 4 days *earlier.*

For sake of completeness, and perhaps a more meaningful perspective, we can also compare the 2021 FFDs with Walter Watson's dates in the early 20th-century. You'll notice that this produces a strikingly different picture (Fig. 4), with a clear majority of the data-points falling well below the line. Indeed, for the 333 species recorded, FFDs in 2021 were (on average) a not-inconsiderable 18 days *earlier* than in Watson's day.

Which is a roundabout way of saying that one's perception or appreciation of the rate of progress, or the relative 'earliness' or 'lateness' of spring 2021 (or indeed *any* spring) depends very much on what one is comparing it against: against the previous year 2021 was really rather *late*, whereas against the previous decade's-worth of springs it was fairly typical but maybe just a touch *early*. In contrast, compared to Watson's springs of nearly a century ago it was, like so many springs since 2008, *extraordinarily* early. Dear old Walter, as I've said before, would surely be incredulous at the apparent absurdity of early 21st-century FFDs.

It would be interesting, if only we could time travel, to compare FFDs today with those recorded by Somerset botanists in the *next* century. A hundred years from now, you have to wonder whether even today's earliest dates might seem to be almost laughingly late.

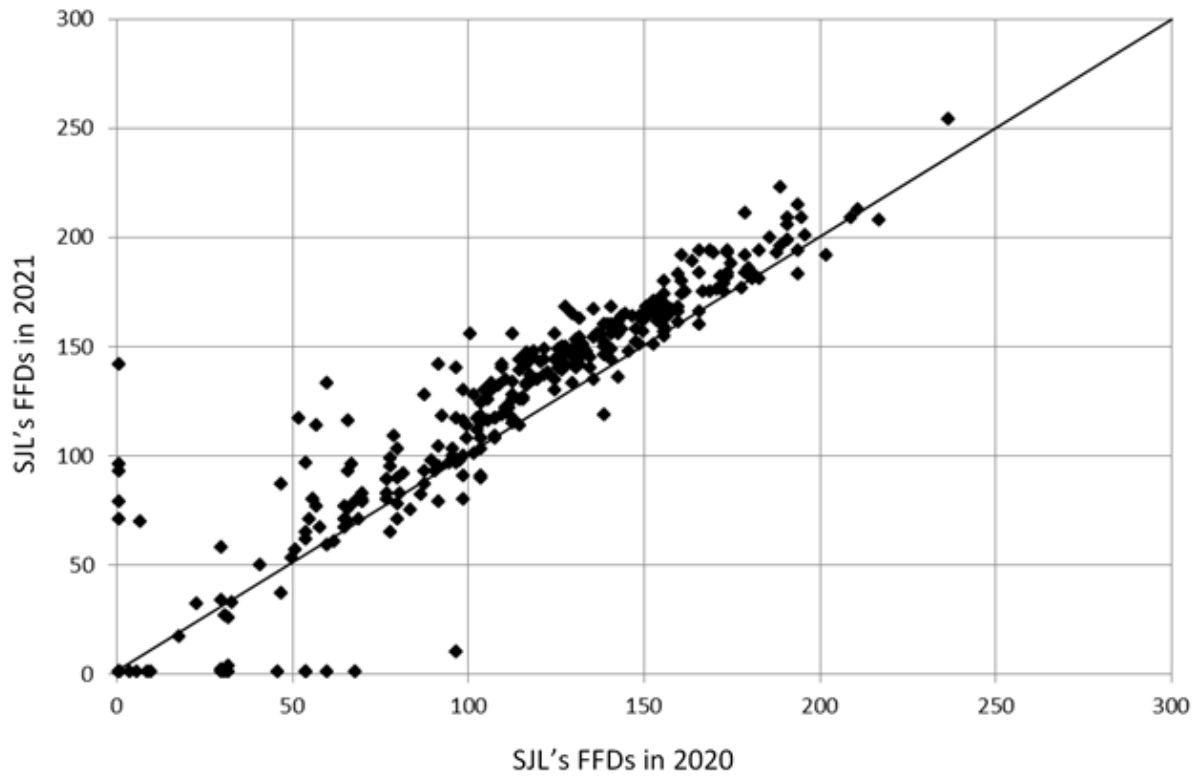Except that, as we already know, this really is no laughing matter.

Fig. 1. FFDs for 326 species in 2021, plotted against their FFDs in 2020. Dates are shown as day no. (1 January = day 1). The diagonal line marks the line along which the data-points would lie if 2021 FFDs were identical to those recorded in 2020; above the line is later than the 2020 date, below the line is earlier

Fig. 2. Teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*), typical of many summer-flowering species in being markedly later starting to flower in 2021 than in 2020 – in this case, 19 days later © Simon Leach
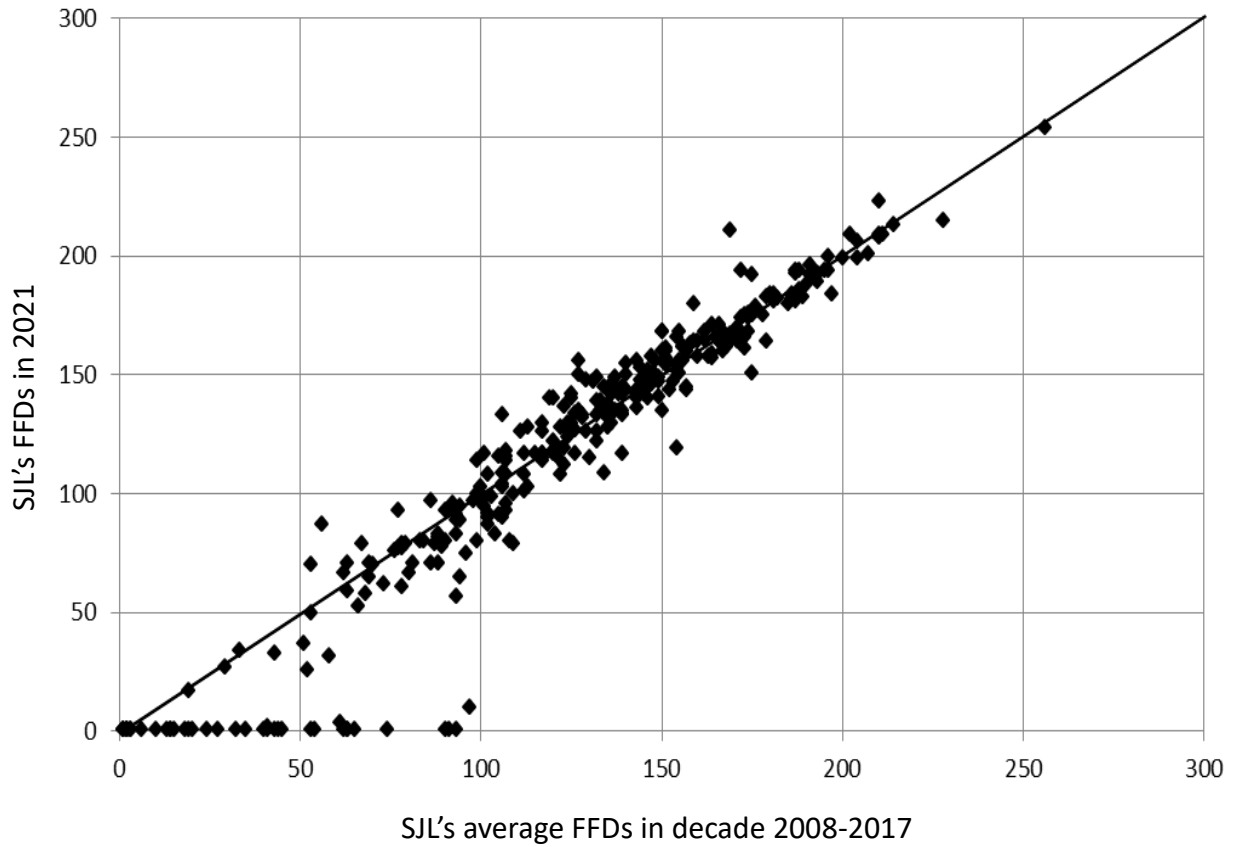
Fig. 3. FFDs for 333 species in 2021, plotted against their average FFDs for the decade 2008-20017. Dates are shown as day no. (1 January = day 1). The diagonal line marks the line along which the data-points would lie if 2021 FFDs were identical to the decadal averages; above the line is later than the decadal average, below the line is earlier
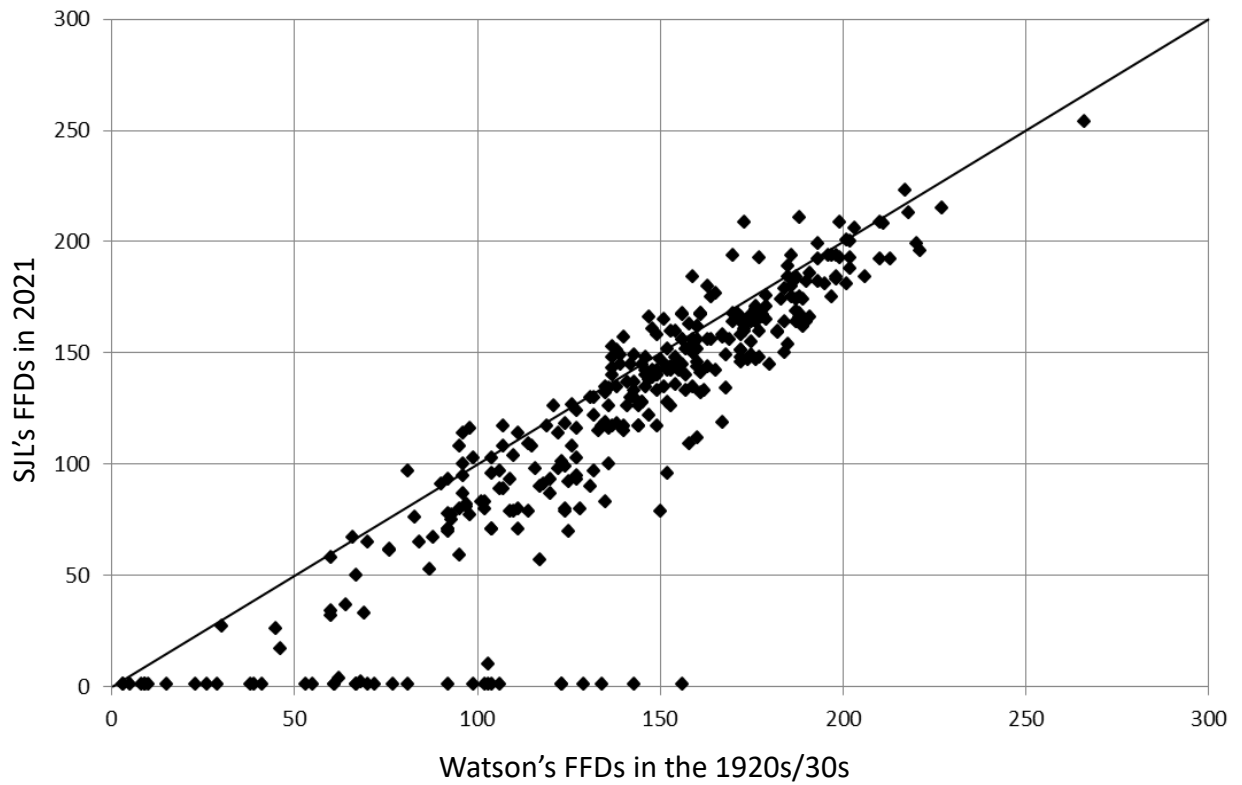
Fig. 4. FFDs for 333 species in 2021, plotted against 'average first flowering times' given by Watson. Dates are shown as day no. (1 January = day 1). The diagonal line marks the line along which the data-points would lie if 2021 FFDs were identical to Watson's; above the line is later than Watson's date, below the line is earlier