

Unusual varieties color spring garden

By Margy Alpern
special writer

The show begins with snow drops, Crocus and ranunculus come next and then one by one the incredible bulbs return to delight us and proclaim the arrival of spring.

Bulb gardens are exciting and stunning, but combining early blooming herbaceous perennials with bulbs gives a greater breadth of form and texture to the spring garden. There are a number of potentially good companions to the upright and stiff tulips and daffodils, many of which are just as dependable as the bulbs and equally delightful.

The perennial blue forget-me-not, brunnera macrophylla, with its showy, sky blue flowers and large heart-shaped leaves complements the bulbs and is a long-lived spring bloomer.

Bleeding heart also naturalizes easily in the light shade of a woodland spring garden. The pink varieties fade rather badly, and I prefer the new white bleeding heart, dicentra eximia alba.

There are many other herbaceous perennials less well known, but very interesting that I believe merit wider use.

THE HELLEBORUS family gives us two unusual March or April blooming flowers that do well in our hardiness planting zone. Helleborus niger, the Christmas Rose, produces waxy white to pink-flushed flowers. They bloom six inches above the

large palmately divided leaves of last year that are still somewhat covered over by protective mulch. I have read that if helleborus niger is planted in a sheltered location on the south side of the house, it may actually bloom at Christmas time.

Helleborus orientalis, or Lenten rose, is quite similar to helleborus niger in appearance and growth habit. Its leaves, however, are pink or maroon fading to a lovely green.

In my garden they both bloom at about the same time. Orientals is generally considered sturdier and more desirable than niger, but both plants deserve your consideration.

Some growers find helleborus difficult to grow, but in a moist soil and with protection from the hot summer sun, they will establish themselves. The roots are very brittle and the plants don't like to be moved or divided.

However, after several years they will produce seeds that, if undisturbed, will root and grow very quickly. It should be noted that all parts of the helleborus plants are poisonous and bruised parts of the plants may induce a severe rash.

Trollius, another great spring blooming plant, is easy to grow in the woodland garden. Their bright yellow, two-inch, globe-shaped flowers rise about eight inches above the light green leaves. If you remove the dead flowers, the plant will frequently extend its period of bloom.

Trollius requires a rich deep soil and does especially well in ground which may be too damp for other

plants. There are several orange varieties available that might be interesting to try, but I find the color orange a little jarring in the spring palette.

ANEMONE PULSATILLA is a hardier plant for our hardiness zone. But after seeing it in our local nurseries for many years, I realized that some people were using it and I decided to try it, too. After several crop failures, I devised a successful growing strategy for anemone pulsatilla.

This anemone is a rock garden plant, not really a woodland plant, and yet my spring garden, where I want it to bloom, is shady.

In the spring after it has completed its flowering and the fuzzy heads look slightly tattered, I carefully lift the plants out of the shady, moist garden and moved them into a sunnier and drier exposure for a summer period of vegetative growth.

In early fall I dig them up again and return them to the woodland garden, where they seem to re-establish and prepare themselves for the winter and the spring bloom. A

heavy mulch is necessary to protect them. This process has worked very well for two years and each year the clumps are larger and more floriferous.

Anemone pulsatilla may be demanding, but its extraordinary appearance is fascinating. The bell-shaped blue, purple or white flowers open in April above beautiful green fluffly foliage. After the petals fall, an interesting, fuzzy, ornamental head remains to be enjoyed. This plant is a favorite of mine, and I enjoy the challenge.

There are nearly 400 species of primula or primrose, so it is unfortunate that we keep seeing and buying the same varieties year after year. These diverse hardy plants lend themselves especially well to mass plantings or edging in the spring garden, and they thrive in partial shade in a soil of rich organic content.

In addition to the grocery store varieties of primroses, which are sturdy and acceptable there are two others I would like to suggest. Primula japonica is an interesting plant

that has tiered whorls of rose, white or purple flowers that open successively up a stem of about 12 inches. An extended period of bloom makes it very desirable.

PRIMULA SEBOLDI, especially the white forms is outstanding. The flowers are like lacy, snow flakes and the leaves look like scalloped, light green petals. This primrose colonizes readily by sending out underground runners, if it likes the situation. Frequent dividing is necessary to assure bloom each spring, but dividing and sharing is one of the bonuses of gardening.

Adonis amurensis is a charming perennial that blooms consistently next to the snow drops toward the end of March in my garden. Adonis produces bright, yellow daisy blossoms that stand only slightly above the dense whorls of fluffly fern-like dark green foliage.

The common name for adonis amurensis is "pheasant's eye," a rather exotic name for a simple plant. The plant prefers a rich, moist soil and some winter protection, al-

though it is extremely hardy. It definitely can be successfully propagated by root divisions.

Not available locally or even through the more popular catalogs, Adonis amurensis can be purchased for \$11.50 plus mailing charges from Busee Gardens, 635 East Seventh Street, Route 2, Box 13, Cokato, Minn., 55321. It's quite special, I think.

Many of the other plants I have mentioned will probably be available locally. I suggest you try Hughes Gardens, 24333 Lahser Road, ¼ mile south of 10 Mile in Southfield (357-1122).

Mr. Hughes generally stocks a large collection of standard and unusual perennials and is always willing to take the time to answer questions and make suggestions. With garden centers becoming larger and more commercial each year, it is a joy to visit a real garden, where many of the plants are actually dug up out of the ground and where one of our area experts is willing to talk gardening. Hughes Gardens is worth a visit.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

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