



Spring Ephemerals Wake Up the Garden in Spring

Every spring, we impatiently wait for our woodland gardens to burst into color. If you have been disappointed by your bloomless, early-spring landscape, plant spring ephemerals.

These perennial wildflowers are energy efficient machines that take full advantage of resources when they are available. They wait for sunlight reaching through leafless trees to warm their soil and the moisture from melting snow and early spring rains to emerge rapidly and get to work.

Their leaves must form and their flowers must bloom and set seed before the leaves of trees expand and steal their light. As the sunlight fades, they accept their fate, reserve the nutrients that they have stored, and simply go dormant willing to wait until it's their time again next year.

Bleeding hearts



Old-fashioned bleeding hearts (*Dicentra spectabilis*) is one of my favorites. Puffy, heart-shaped flowers with rose-pink petals with white tips dangle in rows from graceful, arching stems. Cut a few stems for a vase – they last up to two weeks. In spring, bleeding hearts form large bushy clumps of fresh green foliage. Cut back foliage to 6 inches after flowering to encourage new growth. This, along with supplemental watering, may delay dormancy for a month or more.

There is also a white-flowering version (*D. spectabilis* 'Alba') and a gold-leaved form (*D. spectabilis* 'Gold Heart'). Neither of these is as robust as their cousin, but both deserve a place in your garden.

Bloodroot

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) is a must have for every woodland garden. Its single white flowers appear in April followed by single lobed leaves on each stem. Bloodroot gets its common name from the bright reddish juice contained in its roots. It was used by Native Americans to treat a variety of ailments.

Celandine poppies

Stylophorum diphyllum, commonly called celandine poppies, light up the woodland garden with their abundant, bright yellow to golden yellow, buttercup-like flowers on 12 to 18 inch stems. Fuzzy seed heads develop after flowers fade.

If celandine poppies are given enough moisture, the blue-green foliage may remain in the garden all summer. If deadheaded, they will bloom sporadically throughout the summer.

Give celandine poppies room. They self-sow generously and will naturalize a large area.

Dutchman's breeches

Dicentra cucullaria gets its common name, Dutchman's breeches, because its flowers look like a pair of white knickers hanging out to dry. Plants grow up to 8 inches tall and feature delicate-looking, dusty gray-green foliage.

Dutchman's breeches prefer soil rich with organic matter and moist, but not soggy, conditions.

Shooting Stars

A dainty wildflower, shooting stars (*Dodecatheon meadia*) has foliage only at the base of the plant. Leafless stems, growing 12 to 24 inches tall, hold swept-back five-petaled flowers that resemble shooting stars. Flowers may be white, pink or light purple.

Shooting stars will not survive in poorly drained, wet soils. Plant them near the front of a woodland border where their delicate flowers can be appreciated.

Trillium

The epitome of American wildflowers, there are many varieties of Trilliums that will perform beautifully in and add simple elegance to our gardens. They grow anywhere from 6 to 18 inches and prefer cool, moist soil.

Purple Trillium (*T. erectum*) has dark reddish-purple flowers. White Trillium (*T. grandiflorum*) boasts very large, snow-white flowers. *Trillium recurvatum*, sometimes referred to as Prairie Trillium, has purple-brown flowers and speckled green foliage. Toad Trillium (*T. sessile*) may have purplish-maroon or greenish-yellow flowers over mottled leaves. Yellow Wood Trillium (*T. viride luteum*) sports yellow flowers that stand upright over splotched foliage.



Virginia bluebells

This is the spring ephemeral I wouldn't be without. Botanically named *Mertensia virginica*, its pink buds open to blue bell-shaped flowers. The color is soft, soothing and stunning! The plant grows 12 to 24 inches tall.

Virginia bluebells disappear into dormancy soon after flowering.

As much as you'll love the color and interest spring ephemerals provide, planning for their dormancy is necessary to avoid 'holes' in the garden. Perennials that are good companions include hostas, monkshood, lady's mantle and Anemones. These large-leaved perennials cover the space left behind when ephemerals make their exit.



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