

# Exceptional Perennials



*G. Edwin Varner*

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Written by G. Edwin Varner.

# Preface

The perennials listed in this informative and entertaining ebook were once popular additions to flower gardens. Many are still available for purchase in garden centers, but others are only available after a potentially lengthy online search. They may not be as noteworthy or recognizable as some popular types that are constantly grown, such as hosta, daylily, iris, aster, chrysanthemum, and coneflower. However, these overlooked perennial plants retain considerable appeal and utility, making them welcome additions to any flower garden.

Take some time to get acquainted with these fascinating flowering perennial plants. Why make your garden ordinary when it can become a fantastic, unique showcase of rare, beautiful flowers?

Please note: I have copied pertinent information from my previous ebooks, corrected known mistakes, including minor grammatical and spelling errors, and added new material to this ebook.

The digital photos are from my home, public gardens, many nurseries within my area, and Creative Commons (CC0) licensed images.

# Introduction

A visit to a garden center or a review of print or online plant catalogs will offer a variety of fascinating perennials. The unfortunate result is that there is a limit to what is available. There is only so much space in commercial greenhouses to offer all the perennials that can be grown in anyone's flower garden.

Many perennials that have been grown for several years have, unfortunately, become obsolete and largely forgotten. Newer varieties are constantly being developed, which helps attract gardeners' attention, curiosity, and willingness to purchase and grow them. The sad result is that older types and species are, in time, relegated to relative obscurity.

In the following pages, you will discover some once-popular perennials that may prove difficult to locate. Many are hardy, less floriferous than many new types commonly available are, but still offer pleasure to grace your home soil. They showcase several enticements: colorful petals, unusual floral structures, and fascinating histories.

Most of the following plants are easy to grow and require minimal maintenance, while some can be challenging. You will not feel the pride of growing something special until you include some of the following plants to bloom in your extraordinary garden.

# Acanthus — Bear's Breeches

*Acanthus spinosus*; *mollis*



I have to clarify what the common name signifies. It is one of those head-scratching names. We associate breeches with men's clothing. My first thought was that it is a misspelling of "britches," as in raggedy pants. No, breeches are similar to trousers, but the legs end abruptly just below the knee. Long stockings cover the rest of the legs.

Breeches were standard men's attire before the mid-1800s. It fell out of favor when tailors added extra material to extend down to the ankles. Men were probably giddy over wearing their first pair of "long pants." Today, people still wear them in horse riding competitions and fencing, but the modernized name is britches.

Now that we have learned the brief history of men's pre-trousers (at the beginning of a gardening ebook, for heaven's sake), what do bears (like burley blue jean-clad Smokey Bear) have to do with them and this garden plant? Well, from here, things get even more bizarre.

It all begins with the size and shape of this plant's thistle-like leaves. The edges of the leaves have attractive spiny or toothed serrations. Greek and Roman artisans and builders loved the leaves' artistic appearance. They went "positively ga-ga" over chiseling the Acanthus leaf pattern on any marble structure that needed some decoration. If you need more proof of this "love affair," consider that Greece's national flower is the Acanthus.

The taxonomist Linnaeus named it *Acanthus sativus branca ursina*. The English translation is approximately "Spiny Bear Bract." The interpretation was of the leaves on the flower stalks appearing as the curving claws of a bear.

As usual, it was not long before someone mispronounced the "branca" name as "breech." I know — how can anyone mispronounce that word? That major goof-up name is permanently stuck and eventually became associated with bears wearing breeches or britches.

All right — enough about this weird history. Let's get back on track with describing this tall, growing plant. As mentioned earlier, the leaves command most of the attention, but the flower spikes are nothing to neglect. On well-established plants, the floral spikes can reach six feet tall with several white, snapdragon-like blossoms with ominous-looking purple-black "hoods" or overhanging spiny bracts. They have a Gothic appearance, like an abbey of mysterious monks.

Blooming occurs from late spring to midsummer, lasting about four weeks.

There are two commonly grown species of Acanthus. Among zones 4 to 10, the hardiest is *Acanthus spinosus*, which is more adaptable to a wide range of soil conditions. It also shows a more extensive leaf and floral display than its close relative, *Acanthus mollis*.

All *Acanthus* species prefer plenty of sunlight and well-drained, fertile soil to grow and bloom abundantly. Avoid planting in constantly wet soil, as this can rot the stems and roots, especially during winter. I offer one word of warning: most species are aggressive growers and can spread outward from their original planting site. *Acanthus mollis* is especially prone to this habit, but *Acanthus spinosus* is more controllable.

You can grow *Acanthus* from seed, but some larger garden centers will offer pot-grown plants.

There. Now, let's all calm down about obscure stories of britches, breeches, bears, Greeks, Romans, and hooded monks — it's time to move along to some other impressive perennial plants. Just prepare yourself for more unusual floral facts.

# Alchemilla — Lady's Mantle

## *Alchemilla mollis*



Once popular, this 12 to 18-inch-tall perennial (hardy in zones 3 to 9) may not be exceptionally colorful, but it offers other ornamental features for your garden. It doesn't add any significant excitement to a perennial shade flower bed, but appearances can be deceiving.

The yellow-green flowers are small but clustered together into branching stalks, which florists love to add to bouquets. They appear like chartreuse-colored Baby's Breath (*Gypsophila*) and bloom in late spring to midsummer. After flowering, remove spent stalks to prevent excessive self-seeding. This procedure will also encourage a new flush of bloom later in the summer.

The pleated leaves are pale green and collect or pool rain and dew, which shimmer or sparkle even in partial shade. I suppose this is the main reason for this plant's popularity, but many of us can't resist admiring shiny objects, even if they are droplets of water. It's like adding small, bright, festive lights to a shaded border, but only enjoyed during the day.

This retention of water-beads is by tiny "hairs" (called trichomes) on the leaves. Think of them as being the wax you rub on your car. Like wax, they form beads or small pools on the leaf surface. These water droplets give rise to the common name of "lady's mantle." A mantle is a lady's coat or cloak, and the shimmering water-beads suggest diamonds decorating it. How stylish! Mother Nature is a talented fashion designer.

Although this plant can grow in full sunlight, it prefers more shade to look its best. Like most shady plants, this perennial will grow well if you place it so it receives morning sunlight but is partly shaded in the afternoon. Ensure it receives moist soil, as dry or drought conditions can cause brown spots on its leaves.

You should find it easy to get plants and seed packets in many nurseries and garden centers. If possible, purchase a variety called "**Thriller**." It grows upright (instead of being floppy), has larger leaves, and blooms more often.

# Allium — Flowering Onion

## *Allium aflatunense*



Please think of this bulb as a giant, growing, blooming version of our vegetable garden onion. Depending on the variety, the sturdy flower stalk (botanically called the inflorescence) grows from under 2 feet to nearly 3 feet tall. It forms an enormous ball (also referred to as an orb or globe for greater effect) of gorgeous purple, white, or creamy-lavender star-shaped florets.

You will notice the onion smell if you handle any part of this plant. This is not a bad thing, for this smell (and taste) repels squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, and, especially, deer.

This plant is a lifesaver for bees when it blooms early to mid-spring. From these individual blossoms, plenty of vital nectar and pollen are

available for these insects.

Blooming lasts, weather permitting, up to an entire month. Afterward, the flower head slowly dries (along with the enclosed black seeds), which still looks attractive in your garden. For additional “functionality,” you can also cut the flower stalk for indoor displays, but for our purpose here, leave the flowers in the garden to feed the bees. They will appreciate it more than you.

Plant these bulbs in the fall, ideally in a sunny to partially sunny, well-drained soil location. Different species and varieties are available depending on flower color and stalk size. Look for the popular *Allium aflatunense* ‘**Purple Sensation**’ with large, stunning purple globes packed with several small flowers. Each sphere looks like a blue planet suspended in your garden. Make sure to plant several this fall to get the “fully stunning” effect of color and floral size.

# Anemone — Windflower; Japanese Anemone

*Anemone x hybrida* and *Anemone tomentosa*



Japanese Anemones grow tall — most to nearly seven feet — and less wide, commanding wide-eyed attention. People in Asia call this plant “windflower” because of its long flower stems (inflorescences). Their imagination suggests that a slight breeze will gently sway the flowers as if they’re dancing in the air. Isn’t that a beautiful vision?

Although native to China, the Japanese grew and bred these magnificent plants for hundreds of years. During this time, they created a wide variety—not many in different colors, but in size, floral form, and bloom

time. They display only shades of pink, pale lavender, and white, yet their appearance is exquisitely perfect.

Should you grow this perennial in your garden? Well, it won the 2016 Perennial Plant Association “Plant of the Year” award, if that helps in your decision. Most varieties are super hardy in zones 4-8.

For some strange reason, I never find them offered in garden centers or nurseries in the spring. Fall-blooming plants always get a ‘bum rap’ by not being offered for spring sales in nurseries. A more reliable way to get plants is through mail-order nurseries.

Get *Anemone x hybrida* ‘**Honorine Jobert**’ (shown above) for your garden. This lovely antique or heirloom variety (1858) grows up to five feet tall, with several two- to three-inch, single- to semi-double, pure-white blossoms and several bright yellow stamens. The petals have a lovely satiny sheen, which dares you not to glance but gaze at the flowers.

Another beautiful species/variety is *Anemone tomentosa* ‘**Robustissima**’ or *Anemone vitifolia* ‘Robustissima.’ This robust plant can grow to four feet tall and is very bushy with silvery-rosy-pink flowers produced continuously from midsummer until a killing frost.

You can expect blossoms for several weeks, from late summer to a killing frost. It is not unusual to see several bumblebees rummaging within the stamens, carrying circular packs of pollen on their hind legs, ready to transport back to their nest. For them, this is a treasured resource at this time of year. I am unsure whether they are obtaining nectar—hopefully, they are.

These plants prefer to grow in partly sunny or dappled-shady locations with fertile, well-drained soil. They tolerate full sun but suffer in hot, dry soil. I suggest you plant them where they are in the shade for part of the afternoon. Always keep the soil moist during drought.

# Baptisia — Blue False Indigo

## *Baptisia australis*



True Indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*), known worldwide for centuries, is a valued member of the leguminous pea-bean family. It provides vivid blue colorants used as dyes. This dye was (and still is, for less formal occasions) valued for coloring cloth in various shades of blue. The processed leaves provide this dye. Marco Polo was the first European tourist to visit India to learn about this process, and he couldn't wait to report to everyone on how to cultivate this tropical plant and extract this concentrated dye.

Word of his discovery quickly spread, and the blue and purple dye suddenly became the rage throughout the then-known world. Fabric manufacturers were coloring clothes, window drapes, curtains, and

blankets. At the same time, artists used it as a concentrated pigment to brush on canvas. Ultimately, for most working people, the first commercially made denim blue jeans, made by Levi Strauss in 1853, used this dye.

Only some people could grow indigo plants or purchase the expensive concentrated dye. Eventually, people discovered False Indigo (another legume) as a passable substitute. This exceptionally hardy perennial (zones 3 to 9) can grow in more temperate locations and tolerate drier, even less fertile soil. In the early 18th century, this plant could produce large quantities of inexpensive, deep-blue dye. Even gardeners then valued the grand displays of light blue to deep blue-purple blossoms in summer. And guess what? So can you. Hooray!

Baptisia is native to the eastern USA, but later, through the popularity of the knockoff indigo blue dye it produces, it grew worldwide. For our gardening purposes, it thrives in any setting you choose to showcase those gorgeous pea-like blossoms. It can grow to nearly four feet and almost as wide when fully established. Some gardeners and botanists classify it as an herbaceous shrub when mature. Thus, we need to plan for these future space limitations. The flowers abundantly bloom on long stems from mid-spring to early summer. One bonus for us is that the black seed pods are useful for creative dried-flower displays.

Although the plant can survive drought, it prefers a sunny to lightly shady growth area, has few insect and disease problems, and is very hardy. However, it has a few quirky habits that frustrate many gardeners. From sown seed to first bloom, it can take nearly five years. During this time, it develops an extensive root system and above-ground leafy growth. Even garden-center potted plants will delay blooming for 2 to 3 years.

Another troublesome trait is this extensive root system. You will find it difficult to transplant a fully grown plant when it is dormant. Even if you succeed, damaging the long roots will delay further bloom for a few years. The lesson here is to be sure where you wish the plant to grow and leave it alone—permanently.

To make matters worse, Baptisia is notorious for “flopping over” to the ground when grown in a shadier location. This plant requires ample sunlight for optimal upright growth and flowering. Some experienced gardeners recommend inserting metal hoops (as used to support peony or tomato plants) to keep stems and flowers upright.

# Begonia — Hardy Begonia

## *Begonia grandis*



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From minuscule seeds, mighty pretty begonias will eventually bloom. Mother Nature has outdone herself in creating over 1,300 species of them. Most of these species are tropical or semi-tropical, but they grow well in partly shaded flower beds or containers.

Most begonias have thick, fleshy stems — an adaptation to store water when the soil becomes too dry. They grow best in well-drained soil that periodically dries. If exposed to soggy soil, the stems and tubers will rot, killing the plant. Some begonias develop tubers or thickened rhizomes (stems) that serve as energy-storage structures, helping them

survive the dry seasons in the tropics. Still, they will die if subjected to freezing conditions.

Regardless of growth type, size, or shape, their main appeal lies in their showy, colorful leaves and flowers. The flowers can range from simple, single-petaled constructions to flamboyant, billowy, large-petaled ones. Their leaves can be dark green to bronze with random contrasting patterns.

A surprise for most gardeners is the botanical creature known as a **Hardy Begonia** (*Begonia grandis*), shown above. Winter-hardy to zone 6 (possibly 5, but cross your fingers), this plant prefers shadier locations but can tolerate early-morning sunlight. It can grow to two feet tall and wide by summer's end and produce large clusters of red to pale-pink single blossoms all season long. The large heart-shaped leaves are also attractive.

Doesn't this Begonia sound ideal? Then why is it so darn difficult to find in garden centers? I had difficulty locating one, so I ordered from a mail-order nursery. If possible, try to locate the varieties called "**Pink Teardrop**" or "**Heron's Pirouette**," as they produce larger flowers. Hey, nursery people—grow these plants!

## Betonica — Wood Betony

*Betonica officinalis; or Stachys officinalis;  
Stachys monieri*



The Official Confusing Plant Latin Naming Organization (not a real name, but something probably like it) is at it again by changing a common plant name to another moniker. What was once the genus *Stachys* has now, abracadabra, presto-chango, changed to the genus *Betonica*. Not especially serious to cause chaos in our streets (or gardens), but enough to create mental confusion when reading in older gardening books and catalogs. Why “they” did this is another matter that will take up too many digital bytes. Anyway, the important thing is that this plant remains the plant it is supposed to be — if you understand my convoluted reasoning.

Native to much of Europe and extending into parts of central Asia, this clump-forming, hardy perennial is related to the mint family. “Oh no!” you may silently panic, but fear not, for although the plant may slowly spread outward (over time with underground stolons or stems), it is easily manageable, unlike its relatively unmanageable close white-leaved relation, *Stachy bysantina* or Lamb’s Ear. Most species grow nearly two feet tall and bloom profusely with spikes of pink or blue flowers in late spring or early summer for a few weeks. Their displays are beautiful above their deep green foliage.

Most species prefer to grow in plenty of sunlight and well-drained, but limited, fertile soil, so as not to encourage excessive growth, just like other mint-like plants. It is best not to plant *Stachys* species near other low-growing perennials, as it can eventually smother them. Most *Stachys* species are hardy in zones 5 (possibly 4) to 9 and can become drought-tolerant in drier locations.

Breeders have recently managed to hybridize a new variety called *Betonica monieri* (or the older *Stachys monieri*) ‘**Hummelo**’ **Wood Betony**. This type has almost ever-blooming, vivid neon-pink flowers and a more compact growth habit that appears to blend in well with other mint-related perennials, such as *Salvia* and *Monarda* varieties. It is also more reliably hardy to zone 4 to 9.

Overall opinions of this variety are glowingly favorable, with some growers and home gardeners praising the flower color and bloom length. These accolades ultimately earned it the 2019 Plant Of The Year award from the Perennial Plant Association. Hey, not bad for a mint relation! Something to look for this year in your local garden centers and online nurseries.

# Bletilla — Chinese Ground Orchid

## *Bletilla striata*



This orchid is the easiest one you can grow. When I first introduced myself to this perennial, I was astonished that it was a real hardy orchid with blue petals. It was not an orchid-like imposter but an honest-to-goodness genuine orchid.

This beautiful plant shows us never to assume tropical flowers are always 'tropical.' It is hardy in zones 5 to 9 and, as is typical of all orchids, grows from small, swollen stem structures called pseudobulbs. These produce foot-long grass-green leaves. In mid-spring to early summer, gorgeous pinkish-purple blossoms resembling Cattleya Orchids bloom abundantly. Oh my, are they stunning!

Unlike most tropical orchids, which grow on tree branches, this orchid, which hails from China and Japan, is a ground-dweller. It prefers well-drained, moisture-retentive, fertile soil. And, like its tropical cousins, it prefers to grow in part to 'almost' fully shaded locations. Morning sunlight is agreeable, but these orchids can't stand the bright and hot afternoon sun. The heat and blinding light will cause the blossoms to fade and turn brown.

Yes, tropical orchids are gorgeous but are also a pain in the "you-know-where" to raise (for me, at least), but this low-maintenance relative is a joy to include in any shade garden. After flowering, the leaves blend in with surrounding plants, so learn what they look like to avoid accidentally removing them. They need their leaves to produce enough energy to re-grow and bloom next year. By fall, the leaves die, and the pseudobulb corms go dormant. Please ensure the ground is well-drained to prevent rot. Also, try to avoid over-mulching to avoid excessively wet soil.

These hardy orchids also make excellent container plants for gardeners in colder zones. Allow them to go dormant in the fall, then store the pots in a cool, dark location. Allow the soil to become dry, but water it slightly occasionally during the winter. By spring, new growth and blooms will develop.

# **Brunnera — Siberian Bugloss or False Forget-Me-Nots**

## **Brunnera macrophylla**



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At home in shady, woodsy locations, this zone 3-8 perennial groundcover has gorgeous, bountiful clusters of small, azure-blue flowers with yellow centers in the spring. These blossoms are showy for several weeks and resemble Forget-Me-Not flowers, and are sometimes mistaken for them. That is not a problem, as both types are beautiful.

Brunnera thrives in partial to full shade, but the soil needs to be consistently moist, well-drained, and fertile. The plants appreciate

morning sunshine but avoid hot, bright afternoon locations, as they will develop brown leaves. Individual plants grow to about one foot tall and wide, forming an attractive mound. Over time, neighboring clusters will grow together, creating a green-and-blue carpet in the springtime, sun-dappled shade. What an unforgettable sight!

With so many flowers produced, there is also a corresponding abundance of seeds, which help spread this plant into many new areas. But for shady areas that lack beautiful flowers (especially blue ones), this is not a bad thing for forming new colonies. I'm not sure whether garden centers carry these plants, but you can purchase seed packets.



CC0 Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

These plants are great for any shade garden, not only for their flowers but also for their heart-shaped leaves. One variety, “**Jack Frost**” (shown above), has beautiful, whitish-silver leaves with green veins. You need to add this plant to your garden! Please remember, its self-sown seed

will revert to the regular green-leaf plants. Within a few years, they would outgrow poor Jack. It is advisable to remove old flower stems to prevent self-seeding in this plant.

# Buddleia — Butterfly Bush

## Buddleia davidii



With the common name of this plant, what more do we need to know? We all love the flowers that make butterflies happy. For years, gardeners have observed our large-winged insects gravitate to the colorful, highly fragrant flower spikes. They will feverishly flutter about, inserting their coiled proboscis into the tiny florets.

Are some butterflies attracted to specific colors of Buddleia? Scientists have discovered that it depends on the species: some prefer white, others pink, and still others blue. Check your local garden center for a recently released blue variety called **Pugster Blue®**. This is a smaller-growing type (up to three feet tall and equally wide) with sky-blue

florets, or, as breeders describe it, true-blue florets with the usual orangish central eye in each blossom.

If you wish to purchase a rarer variety, look for **Buddleia Podarasnga3 PP31799**. Fortunately, it is commonly sold as **Blue Ribbon** for easier pronunciation and recall. This one is unique because it has semi to fully double-petaled florets and is periwinkle blue. Some descriptions suggest the color is closer to true blue, with no purple undertone. I have not encountered this variety, so it is on my “gardening bucket list” to find and, hopefully, grow.

Another rare variety is the fantastic variegated **Butterfly Gold**, shown in the photo above. I had to hold off on the suspense of you wondering what the name of this butterfly bush was. The leaves have heavy variegation, with golden yellow changing to white borders and gorgeous blue flower spikes.

When you visit your nearest large garden center, a world of wonderful types awaits you. They offer a wide selection of colorful, potted varieties, making it easy to find the perfect *Buddleia* for your garden. Don't bother growing these shrubs from seed — it takes too long to develop into a blooming-sized plant.

Regardless of their color, all varieties share a common trait — a profusion of tiny florets that burst into bloom from midsummer to fall. These flower spikes emit a delightful fragrance, a blend of citrus, honey, and pine. However, your nose might detect a different scent.

*Buddleia* plants are hardy in zones 5 to 10 and thrive in full sun and rich soil. They are disease and insect-free but sensitive to extreme cold. The top growth may die back in northern climates after winter, but it will quickly regrow from underground shoots in early summer. Avoid over-fertilizing the soil to improve winter cold tolerance.

# **Caryopteris — Bluebeard, Blue Mist Shrub, Blue Spirea**

*Caryopteris x clandonensis*



By late summer or early fall, little blooms except asters and chrysanthemums. Most herbaceous shrubs are declining, and their blooms look bug-eaten and frail. Fortunately, this two- to three-foot-tall, mound-shaped, semi-woody shrub is a welcome sight in any garden in zones 5 to 9, providing a splendid lavender-blue display.

You should realize that a plant with several nicknames must be popular, and Caryopteris is no exception. The Blue Mist name refers to the abundance of the powder blue blossoms clustered around the uppermost silvery-green leafy stems. From a distance, the extended

stamens resemble a bluish mist from a waterfall. The nickname "Blue Spirea" appears to refer to the small clusters of blossoms of the unrelated Spirea shrub. The other common name is less certain when you stare at a single flower. The base, or lower petal, has a cartoonish look, resembling a jagged or serrated beard.

By planting Caryopteris, you're not just adding beauty to your garden but also providing a vital food source for pollinators. The thousands of blue blossoms are a beacon for bees, butterflies (especially the migrating Monarch), and the southward-bound hummingbird, offering them a much-needed 'sugar fix.'

Plant Caryopteris in plenty of sunlight and well-drained soil. Avoid adding fertilizer to the soil, as this can lead to fewer blooms and more leafy stems. It fits nicely into any border, as it grows less tall and wide while dying back to the ground in winter. Trimming the stems in warmer climates before new growth starts in the spring is best.

Once fully established, it can be maintenance-free, drought-tolerant, and resistant to deer, insects, and diseases. What other reasons can we give for adding this shrub to any garden?

You can plant the oldy-but-still-goody, commonly grown type, or other selections offered in larger garden centers. One recent variety is **Beyond Midnight®**, which has more compact growth, dark green leaves, and a more pronounced display of deeper-blue (possibly purple) blossoms. Landscapers and garden center workers agree that this type may be the best Caryopteris available for all flower gardens. Well, you must decide if they are correct or "just hype." Let's all grow it, for seeing is believing.

# Cerastium — Snow in Summer

## *Cerastium tomentosum*



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This plant blankets the ground with billowing drifts of brilliant star-shaped white blossoms from spring to mid-summer. Even the evergreen foliage has a frosty, silvery appearance. If you need to brighten parts of your garden, even if exposed to plenty of sunshine, this ground cover will highlight those areas.

Hardy in zones 3 to 7, Cerastium is fussy about its growing conditions. It needs plenty of sunlight and exceptionally well-drained soil in cooler climates, where summers are not muggy. Soil that retains water for extended periods (especially over the winter months) will cause root rot. The ground must be gravelly or sandy, not clay-based, for successful

results. This plant looks stunning when spilling over a wall or flowing down a slope.

Underground runners spread the plants, or through self-seeding. Compared with other ground covers, landscapers do not consider this plant invasive, even in fertile soil. It is drought-resistant and relatively maintenance-free, but it will look shabby by summer if you do not trim off the spent flower stems.

If grown in a level, well-drained area, you can use a lawn mower (set to the highest setting) or a string trimmer, which is also best for rock gardens. The cutting height should be six inches (or slightly less) to keep the silvery leaves and stems intact.

Your local garden center “may” have this plant or seed packets available for purchase.

# Ceratostigma — Plumbago

## *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*



I first fell in love with this China-native perennial plant, which covered a large patch of ground under a cluster of small trees. The multitude of sky-blue blossoms was mesmerizing. All blue flowers are eye-catching, but these were a “perfect” true blue.

Plumbago is an excellent choice for partially shady locations. You can plant it in full sun, but the leaves and flowers tend to turn pale, especially in hot climates. In a partially shady location, the leaves are deeper green, and the flowers are bluer. The plants should never grow in deep shade or in soggy soil.

Hardy to zones 5 to 9, this plant is late to leaf out in spring and may fool you into thinking it is dead. The intermingling stems are brown, but by late spring, fresh growth begins. By midsummer, those five-petaled Honolulu-blue flowers bloom. This display continues until fall, when a surprising change occurs to the leaves. They transform to a brilliant reddish-orange color.

Although this plant does not have evergreen foliage, you can use its late-awakening foliage by underplanting it with spring-blooming bulbs. The bulbs will grow and bloom before *Plumbago* begins active growth. Hey, you get two colorful floral displays in the same space. By fall, you get the bonus of enjoying those colorful leaves.

Be prepared to take the necessary maintenance measures to contain growth, as the plants spread through underground rhizomes that can become unmanageable when grown in fertile soil. The shoots will spread horizontally, but the flower stems grow vertically, so try to prevent walking on this ground cover.

# Cimicifuga (Actaea) — Sweet Bugbane

*Cimicifuga ramosa* or *Actaea ramosa*



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Botanists have transferred *Cimicifuga* to the genus *Actaea*. They always want to confuse growers and gardeners with plant Latin names. I grew up with the “not so correct name,” so I will still use it here. We can all agree on its nicknames of Black Bugbane, Fairy Candles, and Black Snakeroot. Don’t you love the nicknames of some plants? Old-time gardeners called this species “Bugbane” for the smell of the crushed leaves supposedly repels bed bugs. “Cohosh” is an old Native American Indian name for this plant. “Fairy Candles” represents the tall spikes of tiny white flowers. You can add any other nickname if you wish. It’s your plant and your garden.

Sweet Bugbane is a superb, shady perennial you should grow in your garden. It is hardy in zones 3 to 9 and appreciates well-drained but moisture-retentive, fertile soil. Most of this plant's height is the flower spikes, reaching three feet tall. Like most other perennials, the foliage is low-growing and blends in well with the surroundings.

By mid to late summer, light pink to small white flowers grow up slender spikes resembling "bottle brushes" — another generic nickname of this beautiful plant. They vary in floral fragrance. In her book *"Fragrance in Bloom,"* Ann Lovejoy describes the perfume as "... a strong and carrying scent rather like clover and honey." For my nose, the scent has more of a warm, sweet, but subtle licorice aroma.

Look for a stunning variety called "**Black Negligee**," a seductive, sensual, alluring plant having unusual blackish-bronze leaves if grown in dappled sunlight. I recommend avoiding full sunlight for this variety, as its leaves can overheat and turn brown.

This attractive perennial is slow to establish but long-lived. In any shade garden, this plant is essential for summer enjoyment. Some larger garden centers should carry this variety (and others). Another alternative is to search for nurseries online.

# Conoclinium — Hardy Ageratum; Blue Mistflower

## Conoclinium coelestinum “Wayside”



I took a leisurely early fall stroll in a public arboretum. I zeroed in on what I assumed was an attractive bed of annual *Ageratum*, only to be shocked to see the identification tag listing it as not a regular *Ageratum* but a perennial *Ageratum*. “*Where have you been all my life, you magnificent plant!*”

This plant resembles our common annual *Ageratum* varieties but is a hardy perennial from zones 5 to 9. Think of it in military rank terms — while *Ageratum* is an Army private, this plant is a general. It pulls rank with its larger, fluffy, powder-blue to pale-purple flower clusters on

taller stems. It can spread outward — possibly to the point of being an overbearing groundcover. Well, generals tend to be domineering in many respects.

Prolific blooming begins in late summer and lasts until a killing frost. Besides the fall-blooming asters described above, this plant is one of the last blue-blooming delights to showcase your flower beds and borders this late in the growing season. While you may have some leftover annual *Ageratum* still managing to hold onto a semi-respectable display, this two-foot-tall and wide perennial will provide abundant blossoms for the remaining growing season.

Always keep your eyes and mind open to unexpected discoveries of new garden plants, especially when you think you know everything that is currently blooming. It's these small joys that make life enjoyable.

# Coreopsis — Tickseed

## Coreopsis verticillata ‘Threadleaf Coreopsis’



Sometimes a family of flowering plants gets overshadowed. Once widespread, some plants can become mediocre and later be forgotten. These colorful, long-blooming plants, a vibrant-colored member of the daisy family, once graced flower beds and borders but were eclipsed by the rise of our common bedding plants. Maybe it was because *Coreopsis* is a taller-growing plant; its heritage stems from tall prairie plants. These colorful annual and perennial plants are now valued for their attractive flowers, which grace any garden.

According to some sources, there are more than 80 species of *Coreopsis*. About half are native to the prairie areas of the entire central length of North America. The other half are native to regions in Central

and South America. With these species, breeders have been very busy creating colorful hybrids. Varieties now found in garden centers have stunning red, pink, orange, and vibrant yellow petals, with additional bicolors, bizarre stripes, and splotches – all on plants of varying heights. Most bloom all summer if planted in full sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil.

*Coreopsis verticillata* ‘**Threadleaf Coreopsis**’ is a perennial species. Still offered by nurseries, as a variety called **Zagreb** (named after the Croatian capital) has a mass of thread-like, dark green foliage. Single-petaled, bright yellow blossoms cover the plant most of the summer. It is hardy to Zone 4. My one neighbor (sadly deceased now) had clusters of these plants thriving in a cherished flower bed for over 20 years. The new neighbor who purchased her home and property ripped out the entire flower bed—just plain criminal.

Anyway, all *Coreopsis* (perennial and annual) dislike clay-based soils and prefer a more sandy or gravelly medium. The leading cause of death for perennial plants is excessive soil water retention during winter. Too much water (and ice) will kill the central growth crown.

# Corydalis — Fumewort

*Corydalis flexuosa, elata, and several more species!*



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Surprisingly, Corydalis is a member of the Poppy family. When you think of poppies, you visualize their large, wide-open four petals. Corydalis, however, has smaller, fused tubular petals and a sweet fragrance, adding a touch of flair.

Native throughout the Northern Hemisphere, especially in the mountain-valley regions of China, some species extend into the temperate forests of North America. Curiously, most species are precisely limited to growth zones 6 to 8. They are sensitive to severe

cold, heat, and humidity. Think of it as a Goldilocks flower—dislikes too cold and too hot—but the just-right, suitable locations. *Corydalis* is not limited to temperature; most species bloom in late spring and into early summer.

So, why bother trying to grow this multi-species genus? Well, one thing is that their gorgeous flower colors range from white and yellow to red, pink, and white—and yes, magnificent blues and purples. *Corydalis flexuosa* '**China Blue**' is one to seek for its stunning sky-blue clusters of blossoms atop a bush of ferny greenish-blue leaves. This species usually grows to under two feet when fully established.

Care for a deeper blue variety? Then grow '**Blue Heron**,' with the largest flowers sporting dark blue (purple in some eyes) atop reddish stems and blue-green leaves.

*Corydalis* prefer to grow in partly shady or sun-dappled areas and in well-drained, fertile soil. By mid-summer, the plants will begin dormancy, die back, and rest until next spring.

Garden centers may have potted plants available, but online nurseries specializing in rare garden plants will. Seeds are not a reliable option; they must be fresh, but germination is still unreliable. Some seeds of various species take a couple of years to germinate.

This sounds like a "*Mission Impossible*" plan to include these gorgeous blue flowers in your garden, but don't give up. As long as you have a shady, well-drained area and some protection from severe ground freezing and drought locations, you should have an excellent chance to raise these outstanding perennials. Not trying guarantees you no success.

# Dianthus — Pinks and Carnations

**Dianthus hybrida; superbus**



Members of the Carnation family come in all shapes and sizes. A wide variety of plants are perennial in warmer climates but are annual in colder areas. Like this species, some short-lived perennials self-seed, thereby weakening their chances of living another year. But you will have more plants in your garden each year.

These plants are colorful and fragrant perennials ideal for planting in front of beds, borders, and containers.

Many traditional varieties of historical significance remain available. Some are several years old and will continue to live with loving

gardeners willing to propagate them. They are also living histories; what stories those petals could tell!

They are easy to grow and most bloom in late spring and early summer for about 1 month. They are very fragrant of clove, lilac, sweet vanilla, or clover. Let your eyes enjoy the kaleidoscope of colors, but let your nose savor those great perfumes.

Plant them in full sunlight and limy soil. The soil must be well-drained for them to survive. They are less than 2 feet tall and hardy in zones 4 to 9.

Recommended species and varieties to grow include **Duchess of Westminster**, an antique carnation from the late 19th century. It is one of a few types called **Victorian Malmaison Carnations**, which are very rare. **Mrs. Sinkins** is the sought-after 19th-century variety (around 1868), well praised for the sweet perfume it releases into the air. The English garden writer, Christopher Lloyd, described it (the carnation, mind you, not poor old Mrs. Sinkins) as *“a terrible old slut, invariably bursting her calyx, but with an airborne scent surpassing all others.”* Please calm down, Mr. Lloyd. This variety can look very untidy, but with an outstanding perfume, who cares how she looks!

Cutting-grown types are challenging to find. Try an internet search, and I hope you can locate them. England would be the most likely place to find these rare plants, but Customs regulations could — no, make that, will — pose a problem if you need to import them.

Don't overlook our modern carnations, for they come in longer-blooming, fragrant, and colorful varieties.



*Dianthus superbus* may be the most fragrant, with a glorious, heavenly, delicious, nasal-intoxicating, oh-so-wonderfully sweet lilac perfume that will drift across your garden throughout many summer evenings. I hope I made my point clear with that excessively long sentence.

This species has several types of petals: white, pink, purple, or red; some fringed, some feathery, some freaky-looking. Feel the need to be wild and crazy in your evening garden? Here is your chance to grow this flamboyant plant.

Christopher Lloyd also once stated he would never want to be without this plant in his gardens. In her book *The Scented Garden*, garden writer and author Rosemary Verey declared this plant as “... *the ultimate in perfection in garden scents....*” Wow! What better referrals can you ask for in hiring this plant to bloom in your garden?

The plants can grow to almost two feet tall but are bushy. Try to grow as many plants as possible (from seed) to perfume the entire garden.

Grow the seed-grown variety called the “**Rainbow Loveliness Strain**”, a selection shown above. It wins my nomination for the outstanding perfume plant of the evening garden border. A British Dianthus breeder crossed the Dianthus species *superbus* and *barbatus* (Sweet Williams). The result was this unique ‘hybrid.’ It has the Sweet Williams’ multi-clustered bloom but with the *superbus* species’ flower shape and perfume. You get the best of both worlds in this plant. The scent is tooth-decaying sweet — some clove, but more like lilac. They release this perfume in prodigious quantities and can drift in the summer evening air.

The feathery flowers will smother the bushy plant. One drawback is that it eventually produces numerous seeds, which cause the plant to stop producing more flowers. After the main flush of blooms ends, clip off the flower stems to encourage the plant to produce more flowers a couple of weeks later. Obviously, this is a workhorse of a plant.

# Dicentra — Old-Fashioned Bleeding Heart

*Dicentra spectabilis* or *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*



Once known as *Dicentra* (and still is with us diehard gardeners), botanists now classify this outstanding spring-blooming, hardy perennial as *Lamprocapnos*. I'm sorry, but this name sounds like a newly discovered dinosaur fossil or a comical beast straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. No, I will stick with the old name.

Time for an off-beat botanical history lesson. Who knows – it may come in handy someday, but I doubt it. This delightful plant was first introduced to Europe in the 1840s by the Scottish plant hunter-

explorer-extraordinaire Robert Fortune. Bobby had a knack for going to out-of-the-way worldly places. One day, he came across this charming perennial growing in China, thought it looked pretty, and brought it back home.

Bob had a darker side to him, and it involved being a spy – no, not your James Bond style of snooping but of seeking and pilfering (spy-talk for stealing) tea plants out of China. The British East India Company hired him to travel to China, get friendly with the locals, admire their gardens and their pretty flowers, and, when no one was looking, stuff a few Oriental botanical treasures into his pockets or bags. And, if, by chance, he was to visit a tea plantation – which was his real mission – steal as many potted tea plants or cuttings as possible without the workers (and royalty) finding out. You don't steal in China under the penalty of imprisonment, or, at that time, death. This plan sounds like a garden writer's screenplay for a *Mission: Impossible* movie. Spoiler alert — he succeeded in his mission. We got pretty plants for our gardens and refreshing tea to sip while admiring them.

For a postscript of this historical account, growers shipped *Dicentra* plants to the United States and Canada in the late 1800s. Loved by the public, florists grew it as potted gifts for Valentine's Day. Isn't that sweet? Who said history is boring? It depends on the subject and the people involved!

*Dicentra* is hardy in zones 2 to 9 and grows well in partial to full shade in your garden. It looks great when planted in a woodland setting and is trouble-free if planted in moist, well-drained, fertile soil. Dry soil and hot sun lead to poor flowering and premature dormancy. It is this dormancy that "turns people off" in growing it, for they expect flowers all the time. Sorry, but enjoy the colorful blossoms when they bloom in the spring. The leaves are dark green, while some varieties have a delightful blue-green coloration.

The flowers' common name perfectly describes them. The heart-shaped "puffy" blossoms are usually pink, rose-red, or pure white. The pink and red ones are the most stunning, for they resemble a broken heart with

the bottom showing a large drop of white blood (think of it as blood plasma). Don't worry — a few varieties show crimson red drops, giving these flowers a jolt of *NCIS* realism. In some ways, it looks semi-ghastly but is a well-constructed, charming little flower! As you may suspect, this plant has several varieties with many exciting variations.

There are other colorful species available. One, *Dicentra eximia*, or the Fringed Bleeding Heart, is a wildflower native to the eastern parts of the United States. It is longer-blooming (potentially all summer in shady areas), but the smaller blooms lack the more noticeable heart-shaped characteristics of the Old-Fashioned Bleeding Heart. The leaves of *Dicentra eximia* are deeply cut, fern-like, and last all season. You can find both species in many garden centers and online nurseries.

# Dictamnus — Gas Plant

**Dictamnus fraxinella albus; roseus**



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Here is a plant with several other names, including 'Fraxinella,' 'Dittany,' 'Lemon Bush,' and 'Burning Bush.' The names reflect specific characteristics of this plant. It was an old cottage-garden favorite, but it is now less well known. Times and people change, and no flower remains a constant favorite.

It is a vigorous, bushy plant with three-foot-tall spikes of *Alstroemeria*-like flowers in white or deep rose-pink, with deeper veins. The blossoms, stems, and leaves produce a volatile oil (gas) that smells like a strong lemon or citrus perfume. On warm, still, dark summer evenings, when, under specific conditions, the invisible gas surrounding

the plant will briefly ignite a flash of blue flame when lit by a match. This flame is more flash than a bang, for it doesn't harm the plant.

A pertinent question is: How did someone discover this ability? According to bizarre historical accounts, gardeners throughout the ages have occasionally observed certain aromatic plants sparkle or emit a bluish flame at night, usually when thunderstorms are nearby. The idea is that static electricity ignites the gas. Later versions have some intrigued gardeners using matches to "speed the reaction along." All these witnesses report that the plants in question emit an intense floral perfume or have a strong leafy scent.

Trying to trigger a blue flame never worked for me. I do not consider myself desperate enough to engage in "botanical pyromania," so I will not try it again. I am concerned that the neighbors will call the police to report a suspicious individual who roams at night and sets garden plants on fire. No-thank-you. I'll just enjoy that lemony perfume and those beautiful flowers.

This plant provides excellent cut flowers and is very hardy in zones 3 to 9. It is happy to grow in full to partial sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil.

Once planted and root-established, *Dictamnus* resents transplanting, so make sure you know where you want it to grow permanently. Like peonies, this plant can live for many years.

# Eryngium — Sea Holly

## *Eryngium maritimum*



If you wish to add some decorative bling to your flower borders, this hardy perennial should do the trick. The common name is fitting, given the plant's waxy, spiny, thistle-like leaves and its naturalization in sandy coastal locations. You don't have to live near the seaside, for these plants will adapt well to rock gardens or borders supplemented with gravel-enhanced garden soil. The leaves are usually silvery-gray, while some varieties have an attractive blue tint.

Magnificent colorful varieties are available, such as **Blue Jackpot**, **Big Blue**, and even a smaller type called **Blue Hobbit** (usually found in Middle-Earth nurseries—sorry, a lame *Lord of the Rings* joke), which has a beautiful blue coloration. Various nursery sources refer to the

color as “electric blue.” That should spark some interest in purchasing them.

The flower heads and surrounding bracts also have a shiny appearance, with some varieties more so. They look like large ice crystals or snowflakes.

Hardy from zone 5 and up, Sea Holly is native to sun-soaked coastal beaches of Europe. Clumps of plants can grow to 3 feet tall and wide and bloom from midsummer through fall.

Exposed to the harsh sun and salt spray, the entire plant adapts to overheating and water loss by secreting a waxy, reflective coating. What a strange paradox — naturally growing in hot, sunny locations while looking like ice crystal props in Disney’s animated *Frozen* movies.

Years ago, wild plants were common near sand dunes. Today, botanists discover fewer populations because they are being stolen for flower gardens. This does not have to be the case, since you can quickly grow attractive varieties from seed or purchased nursery plants.

You can also enjoy these flowers during the winter by drying the stems in the fall. Once dry, you can spray them with bright silver (gorgeous!) or metallic blue or gold paint sold at hardware or hobby stores. They make unusual and beautiful Christmas and winter decorations.

# Eupatorium — Joe Pye Weed

*Eutrochium purpureum*



If you're willing to grow tall-growing plants in your garden, this hardy zone 4 perennial is ideal. Native to central and eastern North America, it can reach up to 10 feet tall. Blooming from mid to late summer, we can find this plant growing in moist ground — either in depressed meadows, the edge of forests, and in roadside ditches.

We should grow this plant in any garden to impress all eyes (and noses) with its tall, sturdy stems, impressively whorled leaves, and breathtaking, vanilla-scented dome-shaped, pale-pink to rose-pink flower heads. Long descriptive words (and that equally long sentence) can't convey the magnificence of this plant!

So, how did the Joe-Pye name originate? Rumor has it that an old Native American medicine man, known to colonial New England settlers as Joe Pye, used extracts of this plant to treat several diseases, particularly typhoid fever. The Native word for typhoid was “jopi,” and because of errors in pronunciation (and spelling), it became “joe-pie” or “joe-pye.” Anyway, people named this fantastic plant after him.

Don't let the size of this plant intimidate you into not adding it to your garden. If you allow enough space, it will reward you with gorgeous flowers.

# Filipendula — Meadowsweet or Queen of The Meadow

**Filipendula ulmaria**



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This magnificent prairie wildflower can grow to over five feet tall. It produces fern-like, deep-green leaves and fluffy, creamy-white to pink flower spikes. Each flower is tiny, but each spike contains hundreds of them. They release a sweet, musky, or earthy scent that shifts from light to powerful throughout the day and with the weather. You will need to camp outside in your garden for a few days to determine when that happens.

This perennial was a vital cottage garden plant many years ago, before gardeners became afraid of tall-growing plants and retreated to dwarf bedding flowers only. It makes an excellent background plant for your garden, conveying lightness and airiness, especially when you inhale the sweet but subdued perfume.

The flowers' scent will attract plenty of butterflies to rest and dine on those fluffy spikes, as expected.

Grow Meadowsweet in part shade and fertile soil. It is hardy from zones 3 to 9.

You may have trouble finding it at garden centers, but wildflower specialty nurseries online should have it in stock.

# Fuchsia — Ladies Eardrops

## *Fuchsia magellanica* 'Riccartonii'



Have you ever wished those colorful Fuchsia plants, with gorgeous blossoms cascading down from hanging baskets, were hardy? Yes, that would be spectacular. Well, sorry—keep on hoping—but there is at least one species that can survive cold temperatures, though not in hanging baskets. The **Riccartonii** variety, also known as the Hardy Fuchsia, is native to Argentina and Chile. It is not cascading but a taller, upright growing type—acting as a semi-woody perennial.

Plant this Fuchsia in very fertile, moist, well-drained soil, preferably in an eastern-facing location that receives full morning sunlight to partial afternoon shade. Avoid hot, dry, mostly sunny places.

This plant is cold-hardy and will winter over in zone 6 if adequately protected, unlike our very tender common tropical species. Where frosts are infrequent during the winter, this shrub is deciduous (drops its leaves), but where below-freezing temperatures regularly occur, the tops die back. Mulching helps protect the underground crown and root system.

I live in a zone 5 growing area and heavily mulch the plants with a few inches of pea-sized gravel. This method provides excellent drainage and ventilation to the growth crown. Planting them near the east and south sides of my house also helps ensure their survival through a brutal winter.

Under ideal growing conditions, this plant can reach over 10 feet tall and wide. My plants never seem to accomplish this feat, usually to a relatively modest three feet tall and wide. No matter, they bloom abundantly throughout the summer with gorgeous purple and neon-pink blossoms that attract hummingbirds.

I do not know why, but most garden centers do not sell this plant. Selling the hanging basket Fuchsias is more profitable. Try an Internet search to locate mail-order plants. Raising this Fuchsia in your garden is worth all the trouble of hunting for it.

# Geranium — Cranesbill or Hardy Geranium

## Geranium wallichianum



To avoid confusion, we do not associate these plants with the annual varieties (also commonly called Geraniums), which are botanically correct *Pelargonium*.

The common name of Geranium is Cranesbill, a descriptive name for the seed head that resembles a crane's head and beak. OK, we'll take their word for it. These are beautiful plants; any new gardener should find a spot to grow them.

Eye-catching white, pink, and blue flowering plants are available at larger garden centers and online specialty nurseries. For impressive

blue-flowered varieties, look for *Geranium wallichianum* ‘**Buxton’s Blue**,’ which has grand displays of sky-blue blossoms with whitish centers for most of the summer. This variety tends to form a mound but spreads as a ground cover, making it perfect for edging borders or carpeting smaller beds.

A distinct inter-species hybrid called *Geranium* x ‘**Rozanne®**’ is also available in many nurseries. This plant is considered the perfect blue-flowered hybrid for all beds and borders (even containers). Instead of developing as a groundcover, it applies all of its energy into forming an ever-expanding mound shape. Rozanne has captured the attention and admiration of many gardeners and landscapers with its gorgeous blue-flower displays from spring to fall. They look like ‘Buxton’s Blue’ blossoms but are slightly larger and more abundant. This variety earned the *Perennial Plant Association’s Perennial Plant of the Year (2008)*. The *Royal Horticultural Society* voted it the “*Plant of the Centenary*,” the top honor at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show in its 100th year.

If these two accolades are insufficient for you to grow this plant in your gardens, I don’t know what else I can do to convince you. I’ll try to include a few more reasons, such as that this plant is sterile and can’t form seeds, so it keeps producing flowers instead.

Because of hybrid vigor, you do not need to purchase several plants to fill in any particular area. One plant can expand to a three-foot diameter mound in a growing season. If the plant grows excessively, clip back some shoots. Don’t worry – the plant regrows quickly and forms more flowers.

Like most similar hardy Geraniums, the above types are hardy in zones 5 and up. Zone 4 growers can squeak by placing the plants in a protected southern location (like a house foundation). No matter which zone, the plants grow in plenty of sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. Established plants can tolerate occasional dry conditions but will perish in excessively moist to wet ground.

# Helenium — Sneezeweed

## Helenium autumnale 'Mardi Gras'



Here is a gorgeous perennial that can cause sneezing, but only if you dry the flower heads and grind them into a fine powder. The western Native Americans and the westward-ho pioneers followed this process. The common name they gave was “snuff.”

For those of you who are not into stuffing narcotics into your nostrils, it is nothing like powdered cocaine. Historically, snuff was powdered tobacco, but a less-addictive generic plant was substituted when you can't have the real McCoy. Thus, this beautiful flowering plant was used. Your immediate impatient question is, “*What in blazes do these daisies have to do with all this snuff business?*” The answer is — nothing at all. I thought a little historical nonsense was in order.

Moving on to the primary content of this ebook, the original Sneezeweed flowers are bright yellow, single-petaled “daisies.” Over the years, plant breeders (not under the influence of creating better snuff) saw great potential in developing several colorful varieties for home gardens, for eye appeal only.

Helenium grows quickly from spring-sown seed and will develop into two to five-foot-tall, bushy plants by fall. Throughout this time, depending on the variety, you will encounter masses of brightly colored single to double “daisies,” attracting plenty of bees and butterflies of all sizes, colors, and species.

Make sure to grow your plants in plenty of sunshine and well-drained, fertile soil. They make excellent companion plants for many other garden flowers, especially those related to the Composite family.

Nurseries offer several varieties as potted plants or seeds. One outstandingly colorful variety is ‘**Mardi Gras**,’ (shown above), with young flower heads that start yellow, age to orange, and then red. The central cone is dark brown (or black) with vibrant yellow stamens. No wonder the bees and butterflies go crazy over visiting these flowers! It, and most other colorful varieties, are hardy in zones 4-8.

# Heliopsis — False Sunflower

## Helianthoides var. scabra “Sunburst”



If you wish to add the “*WOW!*” variegation factor to your flower beds and borders, you can’t go wrong by including this hardy perennial. Although it resembles a sunflower, it technically is not one but is related to the immense daisy family. Those leaves will mesmerize you, for they are white and highlighted with green veins. Or is it the other way around — green leaves overlaid with white except for the veins? It doesn’t matter because their appearance is eye-catching, especially when their golden flowers bloom. As summer progresses, their whiteness gradually reverts to a more greenish hue.

A few more related vegetatively grown varieties are available, but **Sunburst** is unique for all gardeners, for you can propagate it from

seed. Genetic diversity will result, but most seedlings will develop this great variegation.

Hardy to zones 4-9, this plant prefers full sun and well-drained, fertile soil. The flowers bloom in early summer and extend until fall. Seed-grown plants may differ in height, but the average adult size will be, on average, two feet tall and wide.

In garden centers, you can find the best cutting-grown variegated selections. This is a must-grow variety to purchase if you plan to create a garden of variegated plants.

## Hellebore — Lenten Rose

*Helleborus orientalis* or *Helleborus x hybridus*



You will probably question my sanity if I describe a hardy perennial blooming in the dead of winter and continuing to do so until late spring. Being an avid gardener is grounds for advanced peculiarities, but in this case, there is such a plant, and botanists call it Hellebore.

While we look out from our warm homes at a snow-covered garden, bleak and with no apparent signs of spring, we can't see what is happening under the snowpack. This perennial (zones 4 to 9) is slowly inching its stems and blossoms up out of the snow. You may think our familiar spring crocus bulbs set the pace for sprinting into early spring blooming, but no, this plant has a two-month head start. It has evergreen leaves, and some remain – worse for wear – during the

winter, but fresh new leaves will also slowly emerge with the flower stalks above the snow.

Its common name is Lenten Rose and is a member of the Buttercup family, not the Rose family. Lenten also refers to the Christian season of Lent. It is during this time that this plant blooms—give or take a week or two. While most Northern Hemisphere garden plants are dormant, this one springs to life even in January and continues to grow and bloom into May. One species of Hellebore, called Christmas Rose (*Helleborus niger*), can bloom in December. Now that is a great Christmas gift for a gardener!

A perplexing question is, why do these plants bloom now? Hellebores are native to Southeastern Europe, especially in the valleys of the Balkan Mountains. In these areas, the conditions are more favorable for early blooming. The species' flowers face downward, where they are pollinated by crawling insects (such as beetles or pre-flight flies) and small animals such as mice. Bees cannot pollinate, as the air temperature is too cold for them. Well, they are pollinated somehow and by something!

These plants are great for planting in semi-shady locations. Like many early spring-blooming bulbs and perennials, this plant loves the early spring sunshine, but as the season transforms into summer, it can't tolerate the intense sunlight and heat.

The flower colors range from white to purple (almost black), with all shades of chartreuse green, pale yellow, light lavender, and some reddish pink added for additional pizzazz. Virtually all the blossoms have contrasting spots, veins, or streaks. Please understand that these flowers are not particularly vibrant and tend to blend in with the dark green leaves.

Most mature plants will grow to almost a foot tall and wide, but eventually form larger clumps or colonies over many years. Besides being raised in part shade, these plants also need well-drained, fertile, moist soil. Adding lime will also help in better growth and development.

Being an evergreen, before the onslaught of winter, trim back or remove the older leaves, which are, by now, appearing gnarly and scruffy-looking. Removing them helps the development of new leaves and flowers. It also makes the garden look tidier.

Over the past decade, there has been significant interest in developing new colorful varieties. You can discover many of these new plants in larger garden centers and online nurseries. Unfortunately, these plants can be expensive to develop because it takes time to produce saleable flowering ones. Seed-grown plants are not reliably colorful and can take more than 3 years to bloom. Well, think of it this way — if you don't plant them now, you have wasted another year in not enjoying them!

# Heuchera — Coral Bells

## Heuchera X hybrida



Let's think of this plant and its sister intergeneric hybrid (all sorts of species genetically mixed together) called Heucherella (reviewed next) as the perennial equivalent of the annual Coleus plant.

Years ago, this North American native perennial was dull green to light copper. The only redeeming quality was the numerous little red, bell-shaped flowers on slender stems. Not only are they pretty, but they also attract the occasional hummingbird. Breeders and growers knew it had the potential to form beautiful shade plants. They were right and later created stunningly colorful leafy plants.

Most of the attention has been on variations of leaf color. Some plants have solid monochromatic colors, while others sport multiple shades. Chartreuse, bright coppery-orange, rusty-red, silvery-white, and purple-black varieties exist.

To get the best leaf colors, this hardy perennial (zones 3 to 8) appreciates growing in partial shade, morning sunlight, and shade for the afternoon. Constant sunlight (along with dry soil) will “burn” the leaves, making large, brown, grotesque splotches and dead leaf edges. Only in zones 3 and 4 can these plants grow in full sunlight.

Flower colors vary from bright red to pink and white. Blooming begins from late spring to mid-summer. Don't worry if you have a problematic, shady area that's too dark. Here, focus on the flowers rather than the leaf colors. I have seen stunning displays of green-leaf Coral Bells with bright white blossoms. The small but numerous flowers resembled strings of bright LED lights. It was mesmerizing!

The plants will grow best in well-drained, fertile, moist to occasional dry soil. Mature plants will grow into bushy two-foot-tall clumps and have few, if any, insect or disease problems.

Many colorful varieties are available as bare-root rhizomes or potted plants in most garden centers.

# Heucherella — Foamy Bells

*Heuchera x Tiarella hybrid varieties*



Though it sounds like the name of a not-so-famous sister of Cinderella, this genus is a hybrid of the above Heuchera and Tiarella. I know, it's all so confusing! Plant breeders are always dabbling with crossing this plant with that plant — usually with disappointing results — but this is a beautiful creation of colorful leafy plants.

Breeders amplified the colorful leaves of Heuchera with additional contrasting colors. The Tiarella genes contribute to enhanced disease resistance and greater adaptability to sunny and hotter climates. The plants will still grow (and look) best in partly to entirely shady locations.

In 2002, the first colorful foliage Heucherella appeared in garden centers. Later, breeders created even more genetically enhanced hybrids. These modern hybrid varieties produce larger maple-shaped leaves with vivid colors and patterns, and show higher tolerance to heat and sunlight.

Today, these plants are gaining in popularity for planting in partly shady locations. Part of this appeal is their growth into a multicolored groundcover. Most new varieties are smaller, bushier, and slowly spread.

As for the flowers, they are abundant on tall but branching, slender stems. The blossoms are much smaller than those of Heuchera, but they make up for it by being more numerous. American growers call them “**Foamy Bells**” because the flowers resemble sea foam instead of coral. They bloom from mid to late spring in shades of pink and white. Hummingbirds and butterflies in your neighborhood will happily visit these blossoms.

Raise these colorful plants in well-drained, fertile, and moist soil. Because of their Tiarella heritage, they tolerate dry soil but quickly perish in wet conditions. Their hardiness is still extreme, from zones 4 to 9.

A growing number of new, colorful varieties are introduced each year. Garden centers and nurseries may offer only a few, but specialist online nurseries will offer plenty.

# Hibiscus

## Hibiscus moscheutos



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Every flowering plant family has a few exotic members that stand out for their size, color, and blooms. This group of plants is no exception. Being part of the extensive Mallow family, they are tall-growing perennials or woody, tropical shrubs.

Some varieties have the largest flowers (in diameter) of any other garden perennial. Do not confuse the colorful tropical and semi-tropical hibiscus shrubs (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) offered in many garden centers with the following variety. Those tropical plants are sensitive to cold and should be stored indoors over the winter.

As with all Hibiscus species, their flowers will last only one or two days (like Daylilies), but produce many new flowers each day. The petals unfurl in their full glory during the day, but by evening fold up and later drop off.

All varieties prefer full sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. With all those flowers and foliage, please water these plants during extended dry spells.

I recommend *Hibiscus moscheutos* '**Lord Baltimore**' (shown above) as one towering variety to grow in your garden. If you have the garden space and need something to show off to your friends, this variety is a must-find, and must-grow-now plant.

Created by the hybridization of several related species in 1955, this hardy (zones 4 to 9) perennial remains one of the best cultivars to grow in any garden. It reaches 8 feet tall (possibly more) and 4 feet wide on well-established plants. For smaller, growing plants, I suggest placing them in large containers.

The bright, crimson-red, dinner-plate-sized (up to 12 inches in diameter) flowers will cover this 'herbaceous shrub' all summer. Estimates of 300 large flowers may appear on a well-grown plant throughout a typical summer. Someone sure had plenty of spare time to count them!

With all these flowers, there will be plenty of seeds produced by fall. In some varieties, yes, but for this outstanding plant, the flowers are sterile and have no seeds.

Since you are enthusiastic (as I am) to get this plant, where do we purchase it? Your local garden center may have it available, but it is offered only as potted plants (since it produces no seeds). If not, several well-known mail-order companies may have it on hand.

# Ligularia — Leopard Plant

**Ligularia dentata; stenocephala**



This bold, “muscular” perennial is impressive in a shady garden, but is mainly unknown. Part of that reason is that garden centers and nurseries may not offer them to the public. I believe the main reason is their size, which can exceed 4 feet. For some new gardeners, that may cause altitude sickness, but these plants are impressive when in bloom.

All Ligularias bloom by mid-summer until fall. Depending on the species, their small, yellow, daisy-like flowers are borne on tall, thick stems like those of Delphiniums. An example of this is *Ligularia stenocephala* “**The Rocket**.” Another species, *Ligularia dentata*, has large clusters of orange-yellow Black-eyed Susan-style blossoms on

long, thick stems. Make sure you plant the varieties called **Othello** and **Desdemona**.

One of the most commonly planted varieties is **Britt-Marie Crawford**, with dark purple leaves and reddish-purple stems, topped with large golden blossoms. James Crawford of Fife, Scotland, named this variety after his late wife, Britt-Marie. One day, while in her beloved gardens, she discovered this plant growing in a plot of 'Othello' plants. It may have been a chance seedling or a mutated section of the Othello plants. After her death, James wished to honor his wife's memory and love of flowers by naming this stunning plant after her. He undertook the complicated procedure of introducing it into commercial production. That was a long process, but it now grows in numerous gardens worldwide. What a shining example of true love!

These plants are hardy in zones 4 to 8 and are native to the colder regions of China, Japan, and even Siberia. Now that's cold! They do not tolerate hot climates and dry soil; cool, moist soil is preferred. If their large, heart-shaped, almost leathery, deep-green, toothed leaves become thirsty from dry ground, they wilt – big time. They prefer their roots to drill deep into moist, fertile soil, though they can tolerate soggy soil for extended periods.

Why are they called Leopard Plants? The big kitty cat's fur has spots, and so do Ligularia leaves, but these spots or blotches are purple, depending on the species and variety. But it is those leaves and flowers that command — no, demand — attention. When you see them, you won't forget them.

# Lilium — Lily

**Lilium candidum; Lilium orientalis**



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No garden is complete without the beauty, grace, and wonder of a Lily. There is a vast world of lily species and varieties rich in color and fragrance that you will love to have in your garden. I recommend planting the following types.

Let's begin with *Lilium candidum* '**The Madonna Lily**', shown above. This is not a lily associated with music-star '*I am a Material Girl*' Madonna, but of the Virgin Mary, religious fame. Historians consider this species the oldest cultivated ornamental plant, with historical and artistic references dating back 3,000 years. And no wonder, for this lily is so darn pretty!

According to legend, it became associated with the Virgin Mary. Many Medieval and Renaissance paintings depict Mary with these white flowers. The pure white sepals, golden anthers, and sweet perfume are symbolic of her pureness of body, heart, and soul. A similar-looking lily is *Lilium longiflorum* 'The Easter Lily'. Many people often confuse this gorgeous lily with the Madonna Lily. Christian churches have long associated this lily with Jesus's resurrection (also known as Easter). The problem is, *Lilium longiflorum* is native to Taiwan and other Japanese islands. I know Jesus never vacationed in those areas, but the Madonna Lily is native to the Middle East.

This Madonna Lily has different growing requirements and habits than other lilies. Flowering in spring, it goes dormant in summer but forms a rosette of foliage on the ground late in fall and over winter. All other lilies (and most other flowering plants) are the opposite. This one blooms before all others with several pure white trumpets and sweet perfume.

One of my most vivid memories is of my mother growing this lily in her garden. Even being a little boy, I could not understand why this plant had green leaves in the heart of winter, surviving under inches of snow and able to bloom by early May. This lily made no sense, which sparked my initial interest in botany.

This lily was once popular in cottage gardens but is now sadly forgotten by gardeners and nurseries. Most nurseries will not have bulbs of this lily, possibly because of its different growth cycle. Specialty nurseries are your best bet for getting bulbs. Please try to grow this unique and beautiful lily in your garden!



Another very hardy lily to find and grow is *Lilium orientalis*, the '**Stargazer Lily**', shown above. For garden lilies, this variety is the most recognizable — maybe not in name but in size, color, and fragrance of the flowers. It is also a favorite among florists. So why include it here if it is so popular? The answer is because it needs to be in your garden if it isn't there already.

Historically, this lily has been a significant genetic contributor to many other bulbs sold today. Predecessors of this lily (based on wild species heritage) had their large flowers hang downward. They were pretty, but they hid their real beauty unless you crawled underneath on your back to view them. That is a rather undignified (and dirty) position for any gardener to experience.

In 1974, California lily breeder Leslie Woodriff created an upward-facing lily which he aptly named 'Stargazer.' What a fantastic name for this stunning plant! From this lily, newer varieties appeared with other

colors, but all had that critical trait of having the large blossoms face outward (and upward) for easy viewing.

Nurseries sometimes overlook offering Stargazer (compared to all the other Lilies) to the public. It is like beloved, older Hollywood actors being replaced by newer, high-profile (and box office profitable) actors. I know I am getting old when I do not recognize more modern actors, but I still gravitate to the older (or deceased) stars on Turner Classic Movies.

# Lupinus — Lupin or Lupine

## Lupinus polyphyllus



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We have a problem here. Is Lupin spelled with the letter “e” or not? It depends on where you live. In North America, it does, but for the rest of the world, it does not. I like Lupin better because many people pronounce it 'loo-pin'.

The Latin words ‘lupin’ and ‘lupus’ mean wolf or wolf-like behavior. People previously viewed the wild Lupin plants as botanical wolves, much like the predatory wolves that plagued shepherds. The wild lupins became invasive weeds and overtook land that could have been used for more valuable crops. However, today, like all members of the pea-bean family, farmers recognize the value of these plants in

improving soil fertility. It's a transformation akin to a big, bad wolf turning into a beloved pet like Lassie, inspiring us with the potential of these plants in our gardens.

Over time, these plants became famous worldwide. One day, in the early 1900s, a British man named George Russell had an epiphany. You know – a light bulb above his head, brilliant idea. He thought Lupins looked “splendidly lovely,” but they could look better. He eventually made the famous **Russell Lupins** after many years of cross-breeding different types. They are very colorful but also have a surprising peanut or almond scent. One hot summer day, I smelled peanut butter—creamy, not chunky.

Lupins are reliable growers and prefer full sun to part shade and acidic soil. They are hardy from zones 4 to 9 and bloom in mid-summer. Look for the favorite **Popsicle Strain** in seed catalogs with vivid colors and sturdier stalks that do not need staking. Try an internet search to find separate colors, such as blue (you may have to settle for purple). Several seed companies will offer bicolors ranging from blue/white to indigo-blue to purple shades.

# Lycoris — Naked Ladies

## Lycoris squamigera



It's not what you think. However, you can have some fun with your friends by saying, *"Come on over to see the naked ladies in my garden!"* This nickname is one of the several common names for this perennial bulb. The other names are Surprise Lily, Magic Lily, and Resurrection Lily. These nicknames stem from the fact that the flower stalks emerge from the ground in late summer, before the leaves develop. Yes, you read that right. This plant is one of those curious oddities Dr. Seuss would grow in his garden (with help from Thing 1 and Thing 2).

It may also surprise you to see them in bloom, as their stems blend into the background. Some gardening authorities (yes, just like the know-it-all ones from your garden club) suggest planting them with hostas. I

have the foggiest notion why. Perhaps they want them clothed in large leaves. I say plant them where you can enjoy their bare-naked-stem beauty!

The bulbs will bloom for three weeks or more. After that, they form seeds, then die back to the ground. Here today – gone tomorrow. About a week or two later, the leaves will emerge and grow. They stay this way over the fall and winter. By late spring, they die back, and the bulbs go dormant until mid to late summer. Then, the cycle begins again. These plants may have come from an alternate universe!

Believed to have originated in China, Korea, or Japan, they are hardy in zones 4 to 10 and thrive in full to partial sunlight and well-drained soil. It is important not to disturb these bulbs. Plant and forget them, except to fertilize and water during growth. Don't dig them up or transplant them!

Many people say the Amaryllis-like blossoms have a sweet fragrance, while others swear they smell like a natural gas leak. No matter; the beauty of those lovely pink flowers is their eye-catching appeal. Growing these bulbs is the only way for most guys to have naked ladies in their garden without having police intervention due to neighborhood complaints. Oh well, hope springs eternal!

So, let's give hearty applause to this currently underappreciated plant for providing our gardens with outstanding beauty throughout the summer and fall. Its floral performance is spectacular.

# Meconopsis — Himalayan Blue Poppy

*Meconopsis betonicifolia, or Meconopsis baileyi*



*CCO Photo courtesy of Pixabay.com. I wish I could have them blooming like this in my garden!*

I am channeling Rod Serling for this plant's introduction. We will now enter *The Twilight Zone* of gardening.

There are some plants that even old home gardeners (alas, like me) have difficulty growing. We can list many plants we think we can easily grow, but they prove otherwise. Orchids shudder at the thought of me becoming enamored by their beauty and wishing to raise them. They don't last long. Long live all gorgeous orchids—the ones out of my hands.

My other unfortunate victim is the enticing, addictive, and alluring perennial temptress *Meconopsis* or **Himalayan Blue Poppy**. Climbing Mount Everest would be far less challenging than growing this gorgeous blue-flowered plant. It is temperamental in its requirements for successful raising in most gardens. Likewise, I get temperamental each time I am determined to raise hundreds — oh, let's be realistic and say at least one plant — in my garden. All I ultimately raise is my temper, muttering, "*Oh, to hell with them!*" and then raising a few marigolds to prove I still have the green-thumb talent of growing flowers.

One rare spring, I successfully germinated a few seeds, and they grew, to my surprise and joy. Later, once they were transplantable, I carefully set them out in a cool, moist, shady garden area. And this is where the sapphire petal anticipation ends — they eventually died. I tried to grow these flowers each spring afterward, but without success. Oh well, maybe I will try again. This sounds like rolling the dice or playing the slot machines in Las Vegas or Atlantic City. Here is my version of gambling with floral beauty — and I constantly lose. Perhaps you will have better luck.

To help you on your quest for Blue Poppy enlightenment, you must play by the rules of successful nurturing. I'll present a condensed version of bullet-point facts without going into a play-by-play account of what we think are "the best" methods of *Meconopsis* culture. I have no idea if these are the tried-and-true ways for successful cultivation, for I have never succeeded. For me, this is all theory. So, here it goes:

- Try to grow your plants from fresh seeds. Don't even try to germinate them from a 2020 seed packet. They may not germinate well from last year's seed packet, but you will have a better chance of success. Seed germination may take up to six weeks. The process of cold soil stratification may increase germination rates and time.
- If you are fortunate enough to have young seedlings and grow them to transplantable size (like any other perennial) or obtain plants from a

nursery, plant them in a partly shady location with moist but well-drained, highly fertile soil. Applying well-rotted mulch is beneficial.

- They cannot tolerate full sun and hot ground. Think cool. These plants prefer cool, moist conditions. If your garden can grow spring-blooming primrose, these plants should grow well for you.
- Growers recommend spring planting rather than fall planting so your plants can develop a robust root system before winter.
- *Meconopsis* can act as a biennial or a perennial (hardy to zones 4 to 7), so patience is vital when expecting late-spring flowering.
- Please understand that, although named as a poppy, don't grow them like an Oriental Poppy (*Papaver orientalis*).
- Cross your fingers, hope, or pray your plants will bloom. But expect they may perish.
- Have Plan B on standby: Sow marigold seeds instead.

I have probably scared you from attempting to grow these elusive plants. There is a possibility of obtaining a slightly less demanding strain. Nurseries are now selling a type called **Meconopsis "Lingholm."** Growers report it to be more reliable in blooming and hardier in warmer locations.

Hold your horses if you wish to gallop to your nearest garden center, for they may not sell this strain. Some online nurseries may offer it. You can also buy seeds, but germination is, unfortunately, unreliable. You should try it, but not me: I know what will happen. Now, where's that packet of marigold seeds?

# Monarda — Wild Bee Balm; Wild Bergamot

## *Monarda fistulosa*



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Some wildflowers have served as multipurpose “tools” throughout recorded history. Although they later came to be adopted for use in our flower gardens, they first established themselves as having medicinal or other curative qualities—actual and speculative—valued and cherished over time. Monarda is one such “pharmacy-in-a-wildflower.”

This hardy perennial species (zone 4) belongs to the large mint family, with square-stemmed cross-sections and, usually, aromatic leaves. The

lavender-blue to lilac-hued flowers are partially tubular with two-lipped, fused petals arranged around a spherical head.

Each flower head lies atop a whorl of pale-green modified leaves called bracts. The medicinal properties are derived from the juice or sap of stems, or from the dried, pulverized, or boiled leaves, flower heads, and bracts. They concocted drinks or combined the powder with animal fat to form a skin balm.

Native Americans applied this homemade Monarda balm to help ease the pain of bee and wasp stings. The early colonists and pioneers later learned of this do-it-yourself remedy. Because most colonists were unfamiliar with Latinized botanical names, they simplified and renamed all Monarda species as Bee Balm.

All Monarda flowers have tubular petals that suit visits by bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies — they all have long tongues to reach into the tubular flowers. Bumblebees prefer the lavender-blue blossoms and need to crawl headfirst into the flowers. Hummingbirds like to insert their long beaks into the eye-catching, bright crimson flowers (like *Monarda didyma*) while hovering near them. The butterflies land on whatever color is nearby and uncoil their drinking straw mouths into the blossom. These excellent pollinators can now enjoy a sweet meal.

*Monarda fistulosa* prefers sunny, partially dry to moist, but well-drained, fertile soil. Being a wildflower, it can grow tall and bushy — somewhat problematic by becoming weedy in ideal locations. The flowers will be in bloom throughout the summer.

What is troubling is finding plants or seeds. You can purchase seeds from specialty wildflower companies. At the same time, garden centers and nurseries prefer to sell hybrid varieties, which are also great for pollinators but may have different nectar quantities (and caloric value).

# Nepeta — Catmint

## *Nepeta x faassenii*



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Contrary to popular belief, Nepeta—specifically, *Nepeta x faassenii* or Catmint—is not a high-maintenance perennial flower. It’s one of the best investments for any garden, especially for new gardeners. The newer *Nepeta x faassenii* hybrids, with their wide variety of outstanding blooms, require minimal care and bloom practically nonstop from mid-spring to mid-fall. When established, they also tolerate drought well.

Many landscapers recommend these plants for beginner gardeners. They instantly add vibrant color to newly established gardens. These plants will thrive if you provide them with plenty of sunlight and well-drained soil.

Is lavender hardy enough to survive your hardiness zone? If not, then this perennial is hardy from zones 3 to 8. Although the gray-green leaves smell of mint rather than lavender, the abundance of flowers throughout the growing season is a rewarding close substitute.

For flower color, *Nepeta x faassenii* offers a stunning array of blues. Several varieties are usually labeled lavender-blue, but some venture into the purple territory. For the best blue-flowered type for a bed or border, consult with your favorite nursery or garden center. You may also find some pink or white selections, adding a touch of variety and beauty to your garden.

What is there to choose from? Several varieties, in fact, but two highly recommended varieties include **Cat's Pajamas**, which provide a proliferation of bright indigo-blue blossoms all along the stems. You would think the weight of these flowers would cause the stems to flop to the ground, but they don't—they stand at attention throughout the summer. Another quality is that the calyxes (modified sepals surrounding each blossom) are purple, extending the display later in the season.

Another sought-after variety is **Cat's Meow**, which flaunts gorgeous lavender-blue blossoms. Mature plants grow shorter and form expanding mounds that fill in pathways, limited border areas, and patio containers.

Because of the abundance of flowers, these plants attract many pollinators—bees, butterflies, and even hummingbirds—to partake in the great quantity of nectar. These plants attract every creature that flies or walks on two or four feet.

There is an unfounded fear among some gardeners that, because of the common name of Catmint, these plants will attract the attention of the neighborhood feline population. Not particularly so, in several observations, but an occasional pussycat may be interested. A close relative of this species is *Nepeta cataria*, commonly known as Catnip. That species is the one cats have a more significant attraction to—for some feline reason.

For our purposes, we grow Catmint more for its flower production. The hybrids may have fertility problems that prevent seed production. Thus, they can make more blossoms all summer. Catnip blooms less but self-seeds aplenty and is more of a foliage plant. It's not particularly attractive to us, but the leaf scent is more to a kitty's liking.

Purr-haps, I have not been purr-suasive enough to extol the virtues of this purr-fect perennial. It would be a catastrophe if you did not include it in a prime location within a garden border. I recommend you go to your garden center or nursery and get your paws on this outstanding perennial. Don't waste any of your nine lives without growing and enjoying the varieties mentioned above.

I know; please stop all this caterwauling and get on with the next plant, which is...

# Penstemon — Beardtongue

*Penstemon strictus* and many other species



Hardy from zone 3 and up, *Penstemon* has many species that resemble Foxglove flowers. Depending on the species, their flower spikes can reach up to 3 feet tall and are covered with flared trumpets or tubular blossoms. Unlike the flowers clustered on a Foxglove spike, these flowers extend outward. Flower colors range from vibrant red to shades of pink, blue, purple, white, and bicolors with contrasting veins or spots.

A key question about this plant is, what's with the Beardtongue nickname? It involves the flower's shape and function. Each snapdragon-like blossom has a strangely developed, non-functional stamen called a staminode with hair-like extensions. This odd

appearance resembles a small, fuzzy beard. I know this fact isn't vital to our everyday well-being, but I hate dangling question marks about nickname origins.

These plants, though, require special care to thrive in your garden. First and foremost, they need exceptional soil drainage. Constantly damp or sopping-wet ground is the death knell for them. Some growers report that growing them in pure sand or gravel does not retard growth or blooming. Gee, if only all plants were as simple to grow as that! They prefer occasional watering like any plant, but not an overabundance.

Native primarily to western North America, Penstemon has expanded its range elsewhere, provided growing conditions are tolerable. Most species and varieties have a limited bloom time that extends from spring to early summer.

Grow these plants in as much sunlight as possible and, of course, well-drained, fertile soil. Unlike most garden flowers, avoid mulching these plants to prevent excess soil moisture retention. A rock garden would be an ideal location to raise these plants.

So, what can you raise in your garden? Well, you can try a bright blue-flowered species called the **Rocky Mountain Blue Penstemon** (*Penstemon strictus*). Many growers believe this is one of the easiest to grow among the Penstemon species. It is long-blooming and long-lived when grown in well-drained soil and plenty of sunshine. It also exhibits excellent drought tolerance. Growing to 36 inches, it also becomes bushy, with hundreds of blossoms visited daily by hummingbirds and bees. It is “that good” for raising in any garden.

Several other colorful Penstemon varieties are available for you to grow. Most will not be available in nurseries and garden centers, so your best option is to search for seeds and plants on specialized wildflower nursery websites and online catalogs.

You can grow these plants from seed sown in the fall (necessary for winter stratification) or purchase potted nursery plants.

# Peony — Herbaceous and Tree Peonies

***Paeonia officinalis*; *Paeonia* × *suffruticosa*  
varieties**



These gorgeous plants need no introduction, as gardeners have treasured them for generations. There are many recorded instances of them outliving the people who plant them, thus growing with future generations of a person's family.

Noted for their large, fluffy flowers on leafy stems, they bloom from mid-spring to early summer. These plants need a chilling period (winter) to stimulate the formation of flower buds.

Many peony varieties have different fragrances, including lemon, rose, honey, spice, and musk. Sometimes, a type may smell of dead fish. Do

extensive research before purchasing any peony, so you don't get something "fishy".

One major classification of Peonies is that they are herbaceous. This means they grow like "regular" perennials but sprout from growth buds on thick, woody underground rhizomes (or roots). This structure resembles a gnarled piece of wood. By winter, all growth dies above ground, but new spring-growth buds live under the surface.

Plant all peonies in full sunlight and well-drained, fertile soil. They are hardy from zones 3 to 8.

Regular maintenance for these outstanding perennials includes supporting the flower stems and removing spent blossoms as they fade. Over countless years of breeding, peony blossoms have become larger and heavier. So heavy that they can bend over to the ground. Not lovely, but what can a gardener do? One easy method is to purchase metal support rings (similar to tomato-cage wire hoops) to hold the developing flower stems and buds upright. Once done, enjoy the outstanding colors and fragrances of your Peonies.

Most larger garden centers will offer a few newer varieties, either as potted plants or as bare-rooted rhizomes with 3 to 5 growth "eyes." Online specialty nurseries will offer older heirloom varieties.



The other classification of these plants is called Tree Peonies (*Paeonia* × *suffruticosa*). Okay, the name is not what it appears to be. They are not growing as tall as Oaks (that would be amazing), but they do develop above ground with woody rhizomes. When raised in prime conditions, these peonies can grow to nearly five feet tall in over ten years! When planting these Peonies, remember not to cut back or damage the wooden structures.

To the untrained eye, Tree Peonies will look the same as Herbaceous Peonies, but will have larger flowers on substantially taller plants. They are also more expensive. For new gardeners, I recommend starting with herbaceous varieties to experience their delightful blossoms and understand how these plants grow and develop.

# Phlox — Woodland Phlox

## *Phlox divaricata*



Wild Sweet Williams is the other common name of Woodland Phlox (*Phlox divaricata*). Don't confuse this with the nickname of *Dianthus barbatus*. This country wildflower became a big city garden "scent-sation." It blooms from mid-spring to early summer, with hundreds of light-blue or white flowers. They are lily-perfumed; if you clump all the flowers with your hands and inhale, you will be in seventh heaven. What a way to celebrate spring!

This phlox, hardy in zones 3 to 8, requires fertile, damp but not constantly wet soil, and slowly spreads by underground stems. Unlike its relative, the sun-loving garden phlox, it thrives in shady, fertile, well-drained soil—especially at the edge of a woodland.

Look for the **Blue Moon** variety, which has slightly deeper blue flowers and bushier growth than native wild plants. It makes a splendid, colorful, and highly fragrant groundcover. A white-flowered variant of the wild species is also available.

Garden centers and nurseries should have this perennial available by early spring. In the fall, you can dig up and separate divisions or clusters to transplant in the shady areas of your garden.

# Phlox — Garden Phlox

## *Phlox paniculata*



The Garden Phlox is a large and diverse group of plants. Professional landscapers consider them “the backbone of a perennial garden” for their hardiness, long-blooming, and colorful flower displays. One feature not noted is their fragrance. I guess that’s not a high priority. They have an aroma reminiscent of peanut butter, almonds, or other warm, nutty scents.

Growing well requires plenty of sunlight, fertile soil, and good drainage. Plant height, on average, is above 3 feet. They bloom from midsummer to fall and are hardy from zones 3 to 9.

No matter which variety you may grow, ensure it is “mildew resistant.” Older Phlox varieties often develop powdery mildew on their leaves by late summer, and they look ghastly.

There are many recommended newer varieties to grow. Search for the type called **David** (shown above), for it represents the best white garden phlox and possibly THE BEST Garden Phlox — period. It has large, pure-white flowers that are also highly fragrant, with a scent of almonds or peanuts (in my opinion). This variety is highly resistant to mildew, so you do not need to spray chemicals on the leaves. It blooms mid to late summer and is excellent for an evening fragrance garden. Many landscapers feel this phlox is the best to grow—and I agree!

# Phlox — Creeping Phlox

## *Phlox subulata*



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This fabulous hardy perennial (zones 3 to 9) will always be the most popular ground cover to plant near a house or outline a border. It is an easy-to-grow and very low-maintenance species of Phlox. The unfortunate thing about this plant (there is always a negative feature with everything, isn't it?) is that it is slow-growing, but when planted in quantity, it will fill in an area faster.

It forms evergreen, ground-hugging, spruce-needle-like leafy mats. By early to mid-spring, the shockingly colorful carpet of white, vivid rose-pink, pale pink, or the ever-popular pale-lavender blue petals provides

a show (and traffic) stopping extravaganza display. A few varieties are available with bi-colored pink-and-white petals.

Over the years, I have noticed some gardeners have used imagination, using the blue-shade variety to represent “flowing” water emptying from an inverted wooden tub or barrel. Or, the blue, mixed with some white-petaled type, represents a small, fast-flowing stream coursing down a slope bordered by a few large rocks. Let your imagination run with this plant!

By late spring, the show ends, and only that green mat of leaves remains for the remaining growing season. But that is okay, for they devoted all their energy to further growth and next spring’s fantastic bloom.

This plant thrives by filling a bed or space and crowding out weeds and grass.

Besides occasional watering and light fertilizing, this plant is a welcome, carefree addition to any garden. It grows best in as much sunlight as possible and with well-drained, fertile soil. It can tolerate some dry soil but appreciates the occasional refreshing drink of water throughout the hot summer. Well, don’t we all?

# Platycodon — Balloon Flower; Chinese Bellflower

*Platycodon grandiflorus*



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From its bud development to full bloom, the popular perennial Platycodon will pique your curiosity. Its unique growth pattern is like an indelible question mark, constantly prompting you to wonder, “*What in the world is THAT?*”

Platycodon is closely related to the previously reviewed Campanula flowers. In some respects, it resembles Campanulas when in full bloom, but not so when in the developing bud stage. When all five petals remain fused, it inflates slowly, like a balloon.

For some observers, the bud resembles a Chinese lantern or a round Christmas tree ornament. As the development proceeds, it grows rounder until “POP,” the petals suddenly burst open, displaying a large star-shaped Campanula-like flower. People give it the other common Chinese or Japanese Bellflower name for obscure reasons. Bells do not display a flared star-shaped appearance—maybe an exploded bell—so it makes no sense to me, possibly for you, too.

The flowers are a stunning bright lavender-blue, almost purple in some eyes, when blooming in a shady location. But the beauty doesn’t stop there. Other varieties exist, with pretty pink or white petals. The blooming season, from late spring through several weeks of summer, is a time of vibrant beauty. Botanists recommend periodically removing spent blossoms to prolong this beauty and prevent excessive re-seeding.

This plant is super hardy in zones 4 to 9, can grow to almost 2 feet tall, and develops a mound shape as it matures. It enjoys plenty of sunlight and well-drained soil for the best growth and blooms. You can plant it in most areas, such as borders, rock gardens, and containers for deck or patio enjoyment. Once planted in a garden location, try not to transplant it later. Doing so drastically disrupts the root structure and may never recover from the shock, eventually leading to death.

You can usually find small potted plants at larger garden centers or nurseries, in person or online. There are a few named varieties, but one to specifically look for is **Sentimental Blue**. It grows slightly less tall but provides plenty of those “almost” true-blue, puffy balloon balls most of the summer.

A terrific seed-grown type, **Pop Star™ Blue**, can bloom the first year when sown in early spring. It, too, showcases stunning deep-blue “balloons and star-shaped” blossoms all summer on more compact growing plants.

# Polemonium — Jacob's Ladder

*Polemonium caeruleum; reptans*



Not every day a flowering plant gets a “holy” resemblance to a biblical reference, but hey, if it receives this nickname, it must be worth growing. And so it is—not only for being a native North American and European wildflower turned garden flower, but also for the attractive symmetry of the stem leaves (thus the nickname)

People usually refer to the popular *Polemonium caeruleum* type as European Valerian, which is native to Europe. Early American gardens considered this species a must-have, and its popularity continues to this day. This plant has an abundance of bell-shaped, sky-blue to “pale purple” blossoms, each with a focal point of yellow anthers to catch your eye.

This plant grows to under two feet and eventually develops a mound-shaped appearance. Blooming occurs in a partly sunny perennial bed or border from late spring to midsummer (or beyond if it enjoys its surroundings).

Situating these plants in partially shaded areas produces better growth and bloom. This extremely hardy perennial (zones 3 to 8) thrives in fertile, well-drained soil. Still, it must have constant soil moisture (not soggy) to survive. Hot and arid locations are not to this plant's liking.

You can find seeds in larger garden seed catalogs, particularly those that focus on wildflowers. Garden center nurseries also offer potted plants, including cultivated varieties with different color selections, floral sizes, and even taller plants.

One particularly stunning variety is **Golden Feathers**, with variegated leaves and sky-blue blossoms. It's a sight that's sure to brighten up any garden!

# Polygonatum — Solomon's Seal

## *Polygonatum odoratum and other species*



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Now growing in any woodland of the world, a new garden plant awaits discovery. Many of our garden flowers originally grew in and along the periphery of forests. Solomon's Seal was a spring-blooming woodland perennial until someone thought to include it in a shade garden. It is possible that the garden was near the woods, where this plant grew. No matter, for it is here, with many species and varieties. Polygonatum may not win a popularity contest, but growers did award it the 2013 Perennial Plant of the Year.

This hardy perennial (zones 3 to 8) includes over 74 species and hybrid varieties. The wild species originates from the northern temperate

regions of Europe, Asia, and North America. They are a close relative of Lily-of-the-Valley (*Convallaria*). A few species of *Polygonatum* (like *Polygonatum odoratum*) actually have fragrant flowers smelling of, yes, that's right, Lily-of-the-Valley.

The stems grow upward from the ground for about 2 to 3 feet, but then arch horizontally. At each leaf joint, one or two white or greenish-white blossoms dangle downward. A typical plant may dangle several flowers from mid to late spring, followed by bluish-black berries by the summer.

One variety to grow is the variegated form, *Polygonatum odoratum* '**Variegatum**', for its beautiful green-and-white foliage and sweetly fragrant flowers.

Why is this plant called Solomon's Seal? No, it does not refer to someone named Solomon and his trained pet seal. That would be eyebrow-raising weird. There are two theories for the name. One assumption is that the plant's sap can close or seal wounds. Some guy named Solomon took credit for this discovery. The next theory suggests that when the leaves drop off the underground stems (called rhizomes), they leave behind scars resembling the sixth seal of King Solomon, also known as the Star of David in Jewish tradition. I think this is the best explanation of the name.

Larger garden centers may sell these plants, depending on the species and varieties, but your best bet for finding them is to order online or from specialty nurseries. The best-known type, '**Variegatum**' described above, is easier to find and worth cultivating.

# Primula — Primrose

*Primula x polyantha; acaulis; elator; auricula; veris; and more!*



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Instead of going down the primrose path, remain in the comfort of your garden to view these colorful primroses. They are always a welcome sight in early spring. Most people see these magnificent flowers not in a garden but in a large nursery or garden center. For non-gardeners, this experience may happen in late winter during the numerous Home and Garden Expos. Table after table of potted, blooming primulas of all colors and shades overwhelms our eyes. Purchasing all those plants is tempting!

Some lucky plants find homes in flower gardens, but we may grow them in the wrong area. Primrose constantly needs moist soil. If the ground dries, these plants will severely wilt and may not recover. All primulas prefer partly shady locations, especially near woodlands or stream banks. They will appreciate full sunlight in early spring. As the season transitions into summer, they desperately need cool, moist, shady areas.

So, what can we plant in our shady gardens? If you have the area, you can grow over 400 (and counting) species and hybrid varieties available worldwide. Most species are hardy from zones 5 to 8. A few readily available species you can grow are *Primula vulgaris* (Wild Primrose), *acaulis* (the English Primrose), *elator* (Oxlip Primrose), *auricula* (Mountain Cowslip), and *veris* (Cowslip Primrose). These species' names sound like a group of gardening comic book superheroes. To save your time reading (and wear-and-tear on my typing index fingers), I will allow you the honor of researching (via Google) these species and all the other beautiful forms in more depth.

There has been extensive hybridization among all these species. The greenhouse Primroses (mentioned above) are *Primula x polyantha*, a cross between the *acaulis* and *veris* species. Plant them in fertile, well-drained but moisture-retentive soil. Check your larger garden centers for other *Primula* species. Seeds from specialty nurseries and seed houses are usually available for rare species. Growing plants from seed can be challenging.

For many centuries, English cottage gardens featured primroses in various colors and varieties. Some primroses were more popular than others, including many unusual **double-petal varieties** of the common *Primula vulgaris*. Many are no longer available, but some were eventually rediscovered and propagated using modern tissue-culture techniques. The flowers resemble rose buds and even fully open roses when they bloom. They prefer moist yet well-drained soil and dappled sunlight, especially in summer. You may encounter these newer double-petal varieties in large garden centers. These plants grow to about eight inches tall and wide.

Most regularly potted single-petaled primulas are usually found in most garden centers, specialty nurseries, grocery stores, and, heaven forbid, gasoline stations.

# Pulmonaria — Lungwort

*Pulmonaria longifolia, angustifolia, rubra, saccharata, and hybrids*



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Once prized as a shade-blooming hardy perennial, this plant has slowly regained acceptance in gardens worldwide. The perplexing question is, why did we lose interest? Gardeners are rediscovering its beauty, not only in its changeable flower colors but also in the shiny spots or patterns that adorn its leaves.

Botanists describe the long-blooming spring flowers as crepe-paper-like in appearance and texture, with a variety of colors — from blue to pink to white. The fun begins when they age (is aging fun?) and slowly

shift from pink to royal purple. Color changes may indicate a flower's age and whether it was recently pollinated. The pure white-flowered varieties glow like festive lights in deep shade.

Let's not forget – impossible to do so – the stunning silvery-white blotches on the leaves. Not all plants have these spots, but the newer hybrids flaunt them.

This plant has a woodland-growing heritage and is hardy in zones 4 to 8. It prefers to grow in a shady area with moist but well-drained, fertile soil. As a springtime bloomer, it will grow for a while in full sunlight, but as summer approaches, it prefers shade.

Why does such a beautiful perennial have such a disgusting nickname? Ages ago, people believed that certain plants could provide medicinal remedies for specific ailments of specific body parts. This plant could potentially treat lung (respiratory) disorders because its leaves resemble diseased lungs. Okay, I can't remember the last time I saw a diseased lung, so I'll reluctantly accept this reasoning.

The genus name *Pulmonaria* refers to the lungs. Since the plant regrows and blooms in the spring, its sap or extract could, with luck, rejuvenate diseased lungs. Well, it makes perfect sense, but today's doctors would need to increase their malpractice insurance if they resorted to treating a patient using this method. Who knows? Maybe there is a future in becoming a botanical-medical practitioner.

You can raise *Pulmonaria* from seed, but you will get many sizes from the resultant plants. Some plants will not have the spectacular white spotting on the leaves. Choose instead to grow a few of the beautiful hybrid varieties offered by larger garden centers.

One highly recommended hybrid variety is **Raspberry Splash**, with rose-pink flowers turning purple in the spring and shiny silvery-white spots on the leaves. Another outstanding hybrid variety is **Moonshine** with pale-blue blossoms, but the leaves are almost white when mature. There are other colorful varieties in garden centers and online specialty nurseries.

# Rosa — Roses

## *Rosa* species and varieties



Antique roses are varieties grown several years ago, some, many centuries ago. Botanists will classify roses as antiques or heirlooms if they were created before 1900. Some authorities feel 1867 is the dividing line. That year, our early modern roses (specifically, Hybrid Teas) were introduced to gardeners.

A few of the old, classical roses are still grown only by specialist nurseries. Sadly, they are slowly disappearing. Within a generation, they may no longer be with us.

There are many makes and models of old rose varieties, including Alba, Moss, Cabbage, Damask, Bourbon, Hybrid Perpetual, and others. Some

roses remained in species form, with no additional varieties. Each group has a different flower appearance, hardiness, fragrance, and bloom time. It is a matter of personal preference whether you adore one rose over another.

Unfortunately, they are rarely seen in our gardens today. There are several reasons for this, including their tall growth and extended width. You will need a large flower bed to develop them. Today's homes are small and don't have the vast acres like those of a Downton Abbey estate.

Another reason is that these old roses need more care and attention than modern varieties. The large, old estates had full-time gardeners to maintain them. I am sure if the owners had to do all the work, they wouldn't have had them!

However, the primary reason these roses eventually lost popularity is that most have only one dominant bloom display of the year. Most bloom in late spring or early summer for a few weeks, and that's it – no more flowers. Modern roses will bloom all summer, but can't compare to the fantastic show of the old ones in full bloom.

So why grow them? They are living antiques with names rooted in honor and love. These are personal roses, and gardeners should never forget them. Unfortunately, that is slowly happening.

One hundred years ago, more than 150 old rose varieties were grown in gardens. Today, fewer than 30 are sold by specialist growers and nurseries. What happened? Blame it on change.

Today, many old roses are replaced by new varieties that bloom more and for longer, are healthier, and have more restrained growth. This is wonderful! Old rose breeders had these qualities in mind at all times.

Should we keep these old roses or discard them like yesterday's newspaper? The antique roses are beautiful, and many have historical stories. Few people now care about them. And here lies the main reason for the decline of these stunning giants. The adage of "out of sight and out of mind" is the fatal disease of these roses. Someday, they will only

“survive” in garden books. Photos of them will survive, but what about their fragrance?

Let's face facts. Old roses command little interest or demand. You could search nurseries far and wide and not find one of these plants. There are specialty nurseries (mail order) that offer some of these shrubs. Please remember, they can be expensive, as are all other beautiful antiques.

I hope you can grow a few old roses before they disappear forever. It can happen within one generation, and that would not only be a crime against history but also against beauty.

Unlike their older counterparts, which bloom for a few weeks in late spring or early summer, modern roses can delight us all summer. Shrub roses are accurately advertised as being the most floriferous, longest-blooming, and exceptionally hardy. Over the past few years, new ever-bearing landscape roses (such as the stunning **David Austin English Shrub Roses**) have great potential for all-summer blooming cut-flowers. Other excellent candidates include several more modern hybrid tea roses.

They all offer improved disease and insect resistance, attractive color options, and continuous blooming. They show great potential to endure periodic neglect, particularly in drought conditions.

All roses appreciate a sunny, well-drained, fertile soil location in beds or borders. Adding mulch will help provide additional fertility, water retention, and root protection over the winter.

# Salvia — Russian Sage

*Salvia yangii* (formally *Perovskia atriplicifolia*)



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Botanists occasionally change the Latin names of plants. In 2017, it was time to review whether the popular Russian Sage was or wasn't a genuine member of the genus *Salvia*. Sometimes, I wonder whether fistfights break out when disagreements over binomial nomenclature arise.

Well, it has now been determined that this plant is an official, true *Salvia*. Its new Latin name is now *Salvia yangii*. Whew! Now, we can all breathe a sigh of relief. One less world problem solved. In the meantime, no one uses this new name and prefers to use the old (and

reliable) common name of Russian Sage. After all, most of us do not go chit-chatting about Latin names.

Now that we have concluded this long and tedious introduction, we can focus on what makes this plant desirable for any garden. One quality is its production of (what else?) blue-to-purple salvia flowers, loaded along long stems. It has the appearance of an abundance of tall, blooming lavender. If you have difficulty growing or keeping lavender alive, this plant can earn itself as a reasonable, colorful substitute. While lavender smells of lavender, this plant has a sage-like aroma when handled. It is reliably hardy in zones 4 to 9 and requires the same growing conditions as lavender.

Plant Russian Sage in well-drained soil and plenty of sunlight for best growth, bloom, and survivability. Constant wet soil spells doom for this plant, so incorporate plenty of sand or gravel. Most well-grown plants can reach over 4 feet tall but are equally bushy, blooming mainly from midsummer until late fall. The whole plant becomes semi-woody as it ages, but trimming back last year's growth in the early spring stimulates fresh gray-green growth and better blooming.

For those interested in adding Russian Sage to their garden, several cultivars are available at garden centers or online nurseries. Purchasing these varieties is often a more reliable option than growing the plant from seed. These cultivated varieties offer enhanced blue/purple coloration, increased flower production, and a more manageable growth size. Before purchasing your ideal blue variety, determine the size of your garden plot to withstand a fully grown plant. It's best to plant most types alone in a small bed or on a border's middle or outer edge, ensuring they don't overshadow smaller flowering plants.

Possible varieties include '**Blue Haze**,' which has pale blue flowers. In contrast, '**Filigran**' is smaller and has brighter blue blossoms. '**Little Spire**' is petite or compact, growing to about two feet tall and wide with lavender-blue flowers. There are reports it can become invasive because of uncontrollable underground shoots plus excessive seed

distribution. This would be fine for more out-of-the-way beds or confined borders where nothing else grows well.

Other types are available at garden centers and in online nursery catalogs, in various sizes and colors. To narrow the list to one popular variety, consider the *2020 Proven Winners National Perennial of the Year*® award winner, **Denim 'n Lace**. It sounds like a silly TV comedy series of mismatched police detective partners: A youthful, muscular, tough guy and a wise, elderly lady with a Victorian-like demeanor who assists in solving crimes. (I know, it's not a realistic scenario, but that's standard strange fare on television nowadays.)

Anyway, it's one gorgeous shrub! The flowers' color is self-explanatory, but the lacy part refers to its highly curated, gray-green leaves. The flowers are long-lasting throughout the summer and into the fall. The amethyst-colored bracts, or calyxes, that hold each flower enhance the beautiful overall coloration.

**Denim 'n Lace** is gaining popularity for its compact height, strong stems that don't flop to the ground, withstands poor soil fertility, drought resistance, low maintenance, and superb blue color. You can even plant it in large containers for eye-catching patio or deck displays. No wonder it is an award-winning plant! Look for it in most garden centers or online.

# Saponaria — Bouncing Bet, Soapwort

## *Saponaria officinalis*



This European wildflower has a muddled history, dating back to Medieval times or even earlier. It is a beautiful perennial in the Dianthus (carnation) family and a terrific bloomer from mid to late summer until a killing frost. Clustered together, the single or double flowers are rosy pink or snow white. They have an incredible Concord grape perfume.

Another fascinating feature is that the leaves form soapy suds when you crush and rub them in water. The Latin name of 'Saponaria' means 'relating to soap' or 'soap making.' Museums did (and some still do) use leaves to produce soap suds for washing delicate or irreplaceable

fabrics. If you need a quick hand-wash, pluck a few leaves, crush them, add a little water, and presto — instant hand soap.

The plants grow to over 2 feet tall, thriving in part sun to full shade and in fertile, well-drained, moist soil. They are exceptionally hardy in zones 3 to 9.

Saponaria retains its wildflower heritage, is invasive but not overly aggressive, and can be controlled with a downward thrust of a sharp spade. Yes, that sounds horrible, but sometimes we have to practice 'tough love' on some overactive plants. It tolerates dry soil conditions and has few, if any, insect or disease problems. No wonder, for the bugs don't want soap in their little mouths!

A recommended rare variety (which is the species only dressed up) has double-petaled white flowers. It cannot form seeds; the only way to propagate it is by cuttings. The magnified grape fragrance is due to the extra set of petals.

## **Sedum — Stonecrop**

**Sedum spectabile; Sedum ternatum or Sedum acre**



Some perennials, like Sedum, often go unnoticed in the garden, yet they possess unique qualities that set them apart. These plants are among the most carefree in gardens and landscapes, thriving and multiplying with minimal intervention. They may not demand much, but they deserve some attention and admiration. After all, who doesn't?

One reason for this apathy is that people consider them boring because they lack vibrant flowers or bloom in the fall. This is a poor excuse, for all Sedum species and varieties have excellent growth qualities in all gardens. They tolerate full sun and dry soil with succulent leaves, so

you do not have to water often. This is ideal for planting in sandy or gravelly soil in dry locations.

There is an old joke about why they are commonly called “stonecrop.” The punchline is that they live longer and need less care than stones and rocks. (Insert drum rimshot and cymbal “ba-dum-ching” sound here.) There is only one precaution to remember when growing all Sedum: never plant them in consistently moist or wet soil, for the stems will rot.

The succulent leaves can exhibit beautiful colors, including variegations. Most varieties display shades of dark purple, reddish-orange (or a dull copper), golden yellow, and green blended with white or yellow. Depending on the species and type, a plant will have clusters of star-shaped rose-pink, white, or yellow flowers.

Now, let’s delve into the exciting aspect of choosing the right type of Sedum for your garden. The beauty of these plants lies in their versatility, which allows you to display them in ways that suit your unique gardening style.

There are two classifications of Sedum plants. You can choose upright, relaxed, or sprawling varieties. The upright growers (such as *Sedum spectabile* ‘**Autumn Delight**’) have larger succulent leaves on one to three-foot stems.



In contrast, creeping or ground-cover types (such as *Sedum ternatum* or *Sedum acre* – shown above) typically have small leaves that can cover pathways or be used as underplanting in rock gardens.

The star-shaped flowers of the tall growers appear as large, separate clusters. At the same time, the groundcovers blanket themselves with tiny blossoms.

The blooming time is also different. Like Autumn Joy, the upright varieties bloom spectacularly from late summer through fall. In contrast, the lax-growers typically bloom from spring to early summer, but their flowers are less showy. The main attraction of these groundcovers is their colorful leaves.

One benefit of these succulent plants is that you can quickly propagate them. The groundcovers' roots grow along the ground where their stems touch the soil. You can cut the upright grower's stems and insert them into the soil at any similar location. Here, they will quickly form

new roots. How easy is that? You can have Sedum growing all over the garden!

# Silphium — Compass Plant or Rosinweed

## *Silphium laciniatum*



Who needs roadmaps and GPS when you can grow this unusual plant? This impressive perennial is native to the vast prairie land of North America. The coarse-textured, six- to nine-foot-tall stems and bright yellow, daisy-like flowers resemble sunflowers but are not directly related to them.

The common name refers to how they orient their lowermost leaves. They position themselves vertically along a north-south axis. By observing their arrangement, the pioneers could obtain approximate navigational bearings.

Why on earth does it do this? Botanists theorize that it orients its leaves to avoid constant exposure to the harsh afternoon sunlight of the prairie. Aligning to a north-south orientation reduces water loss from the leaves by exposing less surface area to direct sunlight.

Another common name for rosinweed is the Plains Indians' practice of splitting the stalks and extracting their sticky sap (called resin). When the resin began to dry, they would start chewing it like bubble gum.

This plant is hardy in zones 3 to 8 and prefers full sunlight. You do not need to worry about regular watering, as it tolerates drier soil. Make sure the soil is well-drained; consistently wet soil will kill the root system. If growing in ideal conditions, it can (possibly) live longer than you — hopefully for a very long time!

Blooming occurs in summer, and each plant can produce large numbers of flowers. Place these giant plants in the rear of your border so as not to shade or overtake your other flowers.

On a sad note, this plant once grew in abundance with the tall prairie grasses before the plow appeared. Today, conservationists try desperately to protect some wild prairie areas.

The great American conservationist, environmentalist, and author Aldo Leopold wrote in his book *A Sand County Almanac* about the loss of prairie flora and fauna. One passage describes him finding a solitary Compass Plant growing in an old, tall grass-covered cemetery. For him, it was ironic that one of the last few remaining wild-stock plants grew in such small protected areas, even there in a neglected cemetery. He wrote, in part:

*“What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked.”*

You will not find this plant offered for sale in any garden center. You may discover plants in wildflower nurseries or in wildflower seed catalogs. Let's hope we can obtain and grow this fantastic plant in our flower gardens.

# **Sisyrinchium – Blue-eyed Grass**

## **Sisyrinchium angustifolium 'Lucerne'**



Embarking on botanical expeditions around the globe, one never knows what treasures await. While most of us can only dream of such adventures, there are fortunate souls with a keen eye for unique and valuable flora. A testament to this is the recent discovery of a stunning, bright-blue-flowered hardy perennial thriving in a nursery near the picturesque city of Lucerne, Switzerland.

Sisyrinchium, commonly called Blue-eyed Grass, is not an actual grass but an Iris with grass-like leaf blades (which many members of the Iris genus share a similar trait). This genus has approximately 90 small-growing species, most with small blue blossoms, and is hardy in zones 4 to 8. They are so small that most go (surprisingly) unnoticed when

blooming in the late spring. I have seen a native species growing in moist meadows near my home displaying these tiny flowers. They are pretty, but the display does not last long. What a shame, but we never know what we can discover a mile or a continent away.

The *angustifolium* species does not differ from all others. Still, someone noticed a larger-blooming variant of the plant in a nursery near Lucerne, with one-inch-plus-diameter bright blue blossoms with yellow centers. I am sure the loud echo of “*WOW!*” bounced repeatedly off the Alps for a while—hopefully not causing avalanches.

‘**Lucerne**’ grows to a foot tall but develops expanding clumps that may confuse you into thinking it is a small type of ornamental grass—until it blooms in late spring or early summer. Within a four-week bloom period are blankets of these vivid blue, starry flowers. After this time, only the deep green “grass blades” remain for the rest of the growing season.

Like most (if not all) Iris plants, plant ‘Lucerne’ or any other *Sisyrinchium* in plenty of sunlight and fertile and moist (well-drained but never soggy) soil to maximize better growth and longevity. Classified as a “wildflower,” it is advisable to cultivate it in a wild garden setting along with other native woodland or grassland plants. Rock gardens are also an excellent area if the soil remains damp.

One piece of advice is to use a long-lasting plant identification label so you don't forget what it is. Also, remember not to cut, mow, pull, or chop the plant out, thinking it is a clump of unwanted grass.

# Solidago — Goldenrod

## *Solidago altissima and other species*



Some wildflower species can become troublesome and invasive. Then there are some beautiful “weeds” you do not consider weeds. Goldenrods are splendid examples. You will forget about weed phobia as you admire their tall, bright yellow flower clusters for several weeks, from mid to late summer.

Long popular in Europe as valued garden plants, these plants are the opposite for gardeners in North America. One primary reason is that Goldenrod comprises nearly 140 species and varieties. It’s challenging to get excited about these flowers when they bloom simultaneously with hay fever-causing Ragweed (*Ambrosia psilostachya*).

People have misunderstood, believing that Goldenrod causes hay fever. Its flowers have sticky pollen and produce nectar to attract pollinating insects. Ragweed has dust-like pollen, and it is common to see clouds of it floating in the air, carried by the prevailing wind to allergy sufferers miles away.

As more American gardeners know that Goldenrod does not contribute to hay fever, they are more receptive to adding this attractive perennial to their gardens. Suppose you prefer not to use the stately seven-foot-tall-plus species. There are now new dwarf varieties or hybrids available that you can plant for late summer enjoyment.

All plants — tall and short — are hardy from zones 3 to 9 and prefer to grow in full sun and moist, fertile soil.

You can purchase seeds from wildflower seed companies. Larger garden centers and nurseries may offer dwarf hybrid varieties.

# Stokesia – Stokes Aster

## *Stokesia laevis*



While walking among the display beds at my favorite arboretum, I always encounter several plants of this beautiful blue-purple perennial. At first, I didn't know what it was (the identification tags on flowers always disappear). The petals were frilly when fully extended, but looked like an Aster. Later, I discovered it was a Stokesia plant. Here is a prime example of how appearances can be deceiving. The plant has beautiful four-inch, blue daisy-like flowers for most of the summer.

Named for English physician and botanist Jonathan Stokes (1755-1831), it is a native wildflower in the southeastern parts of the United States. Mother Nature decided this would be the only species, for it has no other close relatives. In zones 5 to 10, it grows well in full to partial

sunlight across many soil types but requires well-drained conditions, especially in winter. Constantly wet or ice-covered soil will kill it, so ensure it is porous.

For someone who loves discovering new plants to grow in a garden, it was surprising that I had never encountered this one before, even in nurseries and garden centers. Search for the **Peachie's Pick** variety in online nurseries. Discovered growing in her flower garden a few years ago, Mississippi gardener and florist Peachie Saxon knew she had something extra special. This plant grew differently (and better) from all other seed-grown plants in her garden. It displays smaller plants (two feet tall) with much more prominent, upright-facing, deeper blue flowers.

The plant's icing on the cake is the most valuable trait: The flowers are sterile. Wild-grown plants self-seed with abandon, but Peachie's plant does not. This is ideal because it saves energy, produces longer-lasting blooms, and offers greater hardiness.

Another variety is **Honeysong Purple**, with deeper blue-purple flowers and shorter stems.

Stokesia provides plenty of cut flowers over the summer and enticing nectar for several butterfly species, especially swallowtails. I hope these delightful varieties will entice you to grow several in your garden.

# Tanacetum — Painted Daisy

## Tanacetum coccineum



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This very hardy perennial (zones 3 to 7) can still amaze admirers with the beauty of its chrysanthemum-like daisies. The bushy plants can reach up to three feet tall and feature prominent, long-stemmed flowers with ray florets ranging from bright red to pink or white. In contrast, the central disc florets are the usual bright yellow. The three-inch diameter flowerheads can be single or double.

One longtime favorite strain is **Robinson's Crimson**, shown above, which has slightly larger flower heads and can be grown from seed or transplanted. This strain blooms from late spring through mid to late summer, provided it is grown in plenty of sunlight and in fertile, well-

drained soil, and is periodically deadheaded to remove spent blooms. It cannot reliably survive in hotter, humid locations — from zone 8 and up.

The floral displays look stunning when numerous plants are grown together for all perennial beds, borders, and wild-looking rock or meadow gardens. By late summer, let some spent flowers self-seed so they can bloom again next year. One bonus of raising these plants is that they make excellent cut flowers for your indoor enjoyment.

# Tradescantia — Spiderwort

*Tradescantia virginiana* and *Tradescantia  
ohiensis*



I must give breeders of new flowers two thumbs up for developing beautiful hybrid varieties of this eastern North American perennial. Hardy from zones 4 to 9, the wild plants have long, blade-like, dark green leaves and small (about 1 inch) three-petaled blue flowers with bright yellow stamens. If you have never encountered these flowers, you may think they were a small Iris—but they are not.

These flowers bloom in clusters called umbels. A few clusters bloom each day, and each one lasts one day, like daylily blossoms. Over time, a

three-foot-tall group of plants can display hundreds of these small blossoms from mid-spring to midsummer.

One surprising feature of these flowers is when they fade. The petals lose their color and become translucent, allowing light to pass through them. This feature gave rise to another nickname, "Widow's Tears," for weeping over the flower's death. The plants can grow in full sun, but the intense light and hot temperatures will cause the flowers to fade quickly, leaving the widows to sob themselves silly. No, these plants prefer part to full shade and can tolerate extended periods of dry soil. While visiting a botanical garden, I saw a bed of these plants thriving and blooming in dense shade in drought-cracked earth.

The wild plants are not exciting, but the new hybrid varieties are gorgeous. If you need a prime example of what breeders have achieved in creating a colorful variety, please grow **Sweet Kate** (shown above). This fascinating and pleasantly gaudy variety has cobalt-blue flowers nestled among bright-yellow leaves. It is a stunning beauty for any shade garden!

Garden centers should (and I demand they should) have this variety and others available for you to grow in your garden. These newer hybrids will adapt to more sunlight when grown in consistently moist soil. If breeders could make these plants keep their beautiful flowers longer than a day, they would be ideal. We may expect too much from certain plants and should enjoy them as they are.

We need to tie up one loose end. What does Spiderwort mean? One theory is it gets its name from the sticky sap that oozes from a stem when broken or cut. When this sap air-dries, it transforms into a whitish, thread-like substance. People thought spiders drank this sap to make their silk for spinning webs.

Theory number two is that this sap helped heal spider bites. Did you get bitten by a large, vicious spider? Cut a stem and apply the juice to the wound to neutralize the venom and treat the skin. Since the root word is "wort," a plant used for medical purposes, I will vote for this theory.

# Tricyrtis — Toad Lily

**Tricyrtis hirta; T. formosana**



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Throughout this ebook (and my other flower gardening ebooks – yes, a shameless plug), I always write about plants and flowers I have either grown or viewed in nurseries and public gardens. This plant is different—I've never heard of it. With so many garden centers in my area, I never came across it. Out of curiosity, I looked into it, and to my surprise, several online mail-order nurseries sell varieties of this plant. Customer comments from these nurseries' websites rave about the beauty of these perennials.

Many gardeners may also be unfamiliar with this hardy, shade-loving perennial. One reason is that it blooms in late summer and into the fall.

Garden centers and nurseries, large and small, struggle to sell fall-flowering plants for spring sales.

Another reason is that this plant's name may discourage people from planting it. Toad Lilies? Toad! You can forgive the name if you look at the flowers — they are gorgeous!

There are over 20 known species of this plant, but they can interbreed to produce numerous hybrid varieties, all with wild-and-crazy colorful flowers. The one- to two-inch, star-shaped blossoms have a base color, such as white, yellow, or pale blue (again, this depends on the variety), with many contrasting colorful spots. Protruding from the center of each blossom are the pistil and anthers, and they too have spots.

Toad Lilies are hardy in zones 4 (or 5) to 8 and originate in eastern Asia, including China, Japan, and the Philippines. According to an unsubstantiated report, the toad nickname began with the Philippine Tasaday Indians smearing *Tricyrtis* flower juice on their hands before setting out to collect frogs for...a dinner entrée, a frog-jumping contest, something fun to do on a lazy Saturday afternoon — I don't know. They collected frogs – period. That “report” did not go into further detail. Heavens, inquiring minds need to know!

Well, the word "toad," not "frog," eventually came to be associated with this plant. The more rational (and simple) explanation for the toad-name is that the spotted-dotted flowers may resemble the skin-bumps on a toad. The things people imagine when naming plants are delightfully mindboggling.

Let's get back to the real facts about this plant. It thrives in partial to full shade and in moist, well-drained, fertile soil, but will suffer if the soil dries for extended periods. The plants can grow from one to three feet tall and become bushy. In its native lands, it grows along woodland edges or near streambanks.

Try to avoid exposing it to the intense afternoon sun, for it will limit flower production. Gardeners experienced with raising these plants

recommend growing them in containers to get up close and personal to enjoy the beauty of the individual flowers.

There are several varieties of this perennial, and I cannot list and describe them all. Two of the most “commonly offered” species and varieties belong to *Tricyrtis hirta* and *Tricyrtis formosana*. Breeders have crossed these two species with each other and with other species to create unusual hybrid varieties.

# **Viola — Violets, Violas, and Pansies**

## **Viola odorata, Viola cornuta**



I am hesitant to include native wild violets for gardeners (and especially non-gardeners) who have a love-hate relationship with them. We love to see them bloom, but also call them “weeds” and try to eradicate them.

There are over 500 species and varieties of violets worldwide. Many are perennial (hardy from zones 3 to 7) and prefer cool, moist, sun-dappled

woodland-like growing conditions. They can't tolerate full sunlight and suffer if the soil dries. They bloom only in spring, self-seed, and then slowly enter semi-dormancy during the summer. The plants are forgotten about for the rest of the year.

Native violets, such as the common woodland species, come in shades of blue, purple, yellow, and white. They can also spread outward to new territories—other garden and shaded lawn areas—by self-seeding a-plenty.

I once mowed my elderly neighbor's lawn during the spring and discovered several large drifts of wild purple violets blooming in the grass. I hated to perform violet homicide, so I raised the cutting deck an inch or two higher. The lawn may have looked like a bad haircut, but I told my neighbor to enjoy the colorful sight of all those violets for a few weeks. She hadn't noticed them but was thrilled to view their beauty. Being an artist, she later incorporated them into a painting.

The European native *Viola odorata* varieties have an overwhelmingly sweet perfume. Originally called Florist Violets, they are not as hardy in some areas, but they can adapt to new places. To experience a mind-boggling, wowzer perfume, always try to grow *Viola odorata* varieties, including the very rare **Parma Double Violets**. These include **Comte de Brazza** (a double white), **Duchess de Parme** (light lavender color), and **Marie Louise** (deep purple-blue). The Parma violets are tender perennials and are only hardy in zones 7 to 9. Northern gardeners should protect them exceptionally well or pot them up for the winter. They are sterile and can only be propagated by cuttings or runners.

Other fragrant varieties to grow include **Queen Charlotte**, shown in the photo above, one of the most beautiful dark-blue, long-stemmed, single-petaled violets available. **Rosina** is a light pinkish-red. These are hardy from zones 4 to 9.

Don't be surprised if the above single-petaled varieties self-seed and you find new violet plants springing up everywhere in your garden. Case in point, I sold those above varieties years ago while operating my fragrant flower nursery. I rescued the unwanted plants from the fate of

a compost bin and gave them sanctuary in the flower garden. They eventually self-seeded with gusto, spreading new generations everywhere, including far into the surrounding lawn and under some trees. Each spring, more plants bloomed, spreading a delicious perfume into the air. How can we hate a “weed” that does this?

Don't confuse wild violets with the larger-sized members of the Viola family, such as the colorful Pansy. Garden centers always sell these plants, for they grow best in plenty of sunshine. For me, they are delightfully colorful but lack the simple charm of the wild violets.



Another recommended Viola variety to grow is **Rebecca** (*Viola cornuta* shown above). According to several nurseries and garden writers, this is the best bicolor blue variety with a scent that is “positively intoxicating,” as one writer heralds in a gardening article. Or was it an intoxicated writer named Harold? I'm not sure, but other writers agree

that it is one of the most potent-scented *Viola cornuta* varieties available. Plus, it's so darn pretty!

This species is hardy in zones 5 to 9 and blooms from spring to early summer and possibly again in the fall.

Grow these plants in partly shaded borders and containers with fertile, moist soil that is not sopping wet. Most garden centers offer the *Viola cornuta* and Pansy varieties more than the odorata types. Try online sources to find the rare Parma Violets.

# Conclusion

As usual, when I arrive at the conclusion sections of my ebooks, I fear that I have neglected or overlooked plants that, in hindsight, should have been included. This ebook is no exception. My apologies if I overlooked something blatantly obvious.

Many other perennials exhibit exceptional blooming characteristics similar to those listed earlier, including numerous varieties of our “commonplace” perennials that we always plant in flower gardens. Each year, many new varieties appear in garden centers, printed catalogs, and online nurseries. If you encounter these other plants not listed in this ebook, please, by all means, plant them in your garden and enjoy their exceptional qualities.

# **Thank you for reading this ebook**

I hope this publication has encouraged you to consider growing more unusual, hardy perennials for your flower garden. If you want your garden to stand out from the others in your neighborhood, you need to plant something different from what is typically offered for sale as plants or seeds.

To be different, you have to make a lasting, significant difference in your ideas and potential plans. Dare to be different! That includes all the long-lasting, beautiful flowers that brighten your life and home.

Please visit my author website, <https://gedwinvarner.com> for information about my other gardening ebooks and contact details.

## **About the Author**

G. Edwin Varner grew up on a farm, helping his father in the crop fields and assisting his mother in the flower and vegetable gardens. This experience and learning led him to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Botany.

He successfully owned and operated a fragrant flower mail-order nursery for twenty years. Unlike most mail-order nurseries publishing colorful but expensive pictorial catalogs, his frugal catalog extensively described the flowers he grew. He once said, "I write a thousand words worth a picture in my catalogs." Today, he has the same style of writing (thankfully with fewer words) through a variety of enjoyable and informative ebooks. This time, the ebooks include color photos of each flower.

He encourages you to cultivate something unique and beautiful in your gardens. His motto is "Read about it, see it, grow it, and enjoy it!"

G. Edwin Varner lives in a rural area of northeastern Ohio, USA.