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by Dave Demers

IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD, the extremely short period between the melting of the last bits of snow and the first waves of heat is, by far, the most intense and thrilling time of the year. As a youth, I endured lengthy winters in the Quebec countryside, where my only solace was the plant catalogs I received in the mail, fueling my longing for spring. The May frenzy I would eventually put myself through didn't help my reputation as an odd, slightly challenged child. I have since settled on the milder West Coast, where a much calmer spring gently rolls in as the holidays are left behind, peaks over a couple of months, and then seamlessly merges into summer.

Wherever spring is anxiously awaited, early-flowering perennials can be trusted for a colorful celebration. Some spring bloomers are long-lasting, putting on a show for months on end, while others are ephemeral, leaving us almost as quickly as they came. No matter how long they last, each of the following spring bloomers deserves a spot in your garden. These are a few of my favorite vernal gems, sure to infuse life into the garden after the winter finally melts away.

EARLY-FLOWERING OPTIONS START THE PARTY OFF

Nothing signals the end of a barren winter like the splash of electric blue provided by 'Père David' blue corydalis (*Corydalis flexuosa* 'Père David', top left photo, p. 40). Native to the mountain wilds of western China, this delicate-looking plant has masses of narrow, tubular flowers that are reminiscent of wingless, ethereal blue dragonflies. While it resents overheating and going dry, which throw it into temporary dormancy, blue corydalis has proven surprisingly hardy and forgiving. It has fibrous roots that will gently creep away to embrace whatever lucky neighbors it has.

Spectacular spring

bloomers

These perennials are the light at the end of a long, wintry tunnel

White doesn't
have to be boring

NAME: 'Canyon Snow' Pacific Coast hybrid iris

USDA HARDINESS ZONES: 7 to 9

SIZE: 12 to 18 inches tall and wide

CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; well-drained soil

STAYING POWER: Evergreen





A blue that takes your breath away

NAME: 'Père David' blue corydalis
ZONES: 6 to 8
SIZE: 12 inches tall and wide
CONDITIONS: Partial shade; moist, well-drained soil
STAYING POWER: Long-lasting in cool areas; goes dormant in hot, dry conditions



Melt away the winter with this sunburst

NAME: Rigid spurge
ZONES: 7 to 11
SIZE: 12 to 24 inches tall and wide
CONDITIONS: Full sun; well-drained soil
STAYING POWER: Evergreen



Small flowers with a big impact

NAME: 'Crimson Fans' mukdenia
ZONES: 7 to 9
SIZE: 14 inches tall and 16 inches wide
CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; moist, well-drained soil
STAYING POWER: Lasts all season; goes dormant in fall

Graced by delicate, lacy foliage, 'Père David' will continue to bloom from early spring well into summer and again in fall, given that springlike conditions prevail.

Another selection that has multiseason appeal is mukdenia, which thrives in rich soil and under the coldest skies without much fuss. Its squat, maple-shaped leaves are a fresh, glossy green. Dense constellations of starry white flowers, however, steal the show, making a statement above the just-emerging foliage in early spring. Among a handful of tempting selections is 'Crimson Fans' mukdenia (*Mukdenia rossii* 'Crimson Fans', syn. 'Karasuba'). This cultivar is especially great for the tendency of its foliage to redden as temperatures rise, holding this hue until the close of the season.

Rigid spurge (*Euphorbia rigida*) is also an early-spring standout with interesting foliage. This unique-looking plant grows into a knee-high, rounded specimen. It is cloaked with slender, pointed, grayish blue leaves, all neatly set along stiff stems. The somewhat quiet flowers are nestled among much larger chartreuse bracts, for a lasting, electrifying display;



Pretty, pink, and tough as nails

NAME: Gibraltar candytuft
ZONES: 5 to 9
SIZE: 6 to 12 inches tall and 18 inches wide
CONDITIONS: Full sun; well-drained, lean soil
STAYING POWER: Stays evergreen in warmer zones; goes dormant in fall in cooler zones

this arrangement isn't too far from the festive poinsettia, a family relative. While this spurge could technically marry with early bulbs for an exotic-looking but functional pairing, a more natural match would be with other mates that like dry conditions, such as agaves (*Agave* spp. and cvs., Zones 9–11).

Although native to northern Africa, Gibraltar candytuft (*Iberis gibraltarica*) is hardy enough for a fair number of gardens on this continent. It is a short subshrub with rosettes of wedge-shaped, medium green leaves. Compared to the traditional candytuft, this beefy species offers a decadent flower display.

In midspring, the whole plant disappears under an abundance of flat, light violet to pinkish white blossoms, creating a lasting mound of color. Follow a lean-and-mean regimen because Gibraltar candytuft tends to thrive in poor, dry soils with little or no fertilization. This low-maintenance approach will encourage tight growth and optimal flowering. Like most candytufts, a severe haircut in the wake of its blossoming is mandatory to prevent it from getting too leggy.

Contrary to its better-known vining siblings, 'Flaccidus' spring vetch (*Lathyrus vernus* 'Flaccidus', top photo, p. 42) is a perennial pea that forms

DESIGN TIP

Be ready with an ephemeral action plan

The rapidity of some spring bloomers to enliven our still-frozen lives is oftentimes matched only by their prompt exit. These disappearing perennials are called "ephemeral" for their short but sweet presence in the garden. As they fall into dormancy, these plants sometimes leave a hole in the all-too-young fabric of our garden. The best way to avoid this eyesore is by planting late-emerging bedmates. The dwarf larkspur, trillium, and corydalis should, therefore, be surrounded by perennials such as hostas, ferns, and ornamental grasses. These companions cover up all traces of our dear ephemerals and protect them from our accidental poking and digging.