

## SPRING BLOOMING PERENNIALS

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CLEMSON – Spring blooming perennials often get overshadowed by showy woody plants like azaleas and dogwoods, but they can be stunning in their own right. Try them mixed with woody plants for an even more spectacular show.

An especially striking group of spring blooming plants are the phloxes. *Phlox subulata*, also known as thrift or moss phlox, is the plant generally relegated to the steep sides of drainage ditches in old front yards. While that's a fitting location (they like good drainage and full sun), this versatile and easy plant could certainly be used in other areas. Try growing it around the feet of tall conifers like 'Blue Point' junipers or letting it drape gracefully over a stone wall. For shady areas, try *P. stolonifera* and *P. divaricata*. Both make wonderful woodland groundcovers with their pink, blue, purple or white flowers and combine well with miniature daffodils, bluebells and ferns.

For subtle beauty, try Epimediums. Also called barrenwort, these plants make a lovely, shade-loving, evergreen groundcover. They even tolerate dry shade. In some varieties, the pointed oval leaves take on a reddish cast during the winter. Old leaves should be pruned out before the flowers and new leaves emerge in the spring. Flowers come in many pastel shades, including pink, yellow, purple and white and last for a month or more.

Nothing beats the elegance of old fashioned bleeding hearts (*Dicentra spectabilis*) in a woodland area. Emerging in early spring with flowers already formed, bleeding hearts quickly rise to several feet tall and bloom for a month or more. Pink or white heart-shaped flowers dangle from long stems, with many flowers per stem and many stems per plant. Bleeding hearts look great combined with the emerging leaves of hostas and ferns or just about anything else in a shady garden. They are so beloved that gardeners forgive the plants for disappearing soon after they flower, staying dormant until the following spring. Old-fashioned bleeding hearts grow best in the upstate. *Dicentra exima*, our native bleeding heart, sticks around throughout the growing season and flowers over a longer period. There are many varieties available, but the most common is 'Luxuriant', which offers lacy, blue-green leaves and pink flowers. It can be grown throughout South Carolina. All bleeding hearts prefer shady areas.

*Geranium macrorrhizum* has spicy-scented, fuzzy leaves and magenta flowers and makes a fragrant, fast growing groundcover for a partially shaded area. It is one of the few true geraniums that can tolerate heat and humidity, and its evergreen leaves are never bothered by pests.

Many irises bloom in the spring. Bearded irises are the most common, but there are two lesser-known native species that grow nicely in shady areas. *Iris verna* is a small plant (only about six inches tall) that sends up small purple flowers with orange markings for several weeks. *Iris cristata* is another small plant, topping out at only four inches. Its lavender/blue flowers have yellow markings.

*Baptisia australis* is one of our best natives for hot, sunny areas. Blue-green, pea-like leaves emerge in late spring, followed quickly by brilliant blue flowers in long spikes. Plants are large—growing three to four feet tall and wide—and the foliage looks nice all summer.

Looking for a low-growing, shade-loving groundcover with purple leaves? Try *Viola labradorica*, the Labrador violet. The leaves are intensely purple in the fall, winter and spring, and have a purple cast all summer. Labrador violet quickly forms a nice mat and reseeds itself, but not aggressively so. Purple, violet-like flowers appear over a long period in spring, with an occasional flower popping up here and there during the rest of the year.

*Dianthus gratianopolitanus* 'Bath's Pink' is one of my very favorite plants. This low-growing, mat-like plant thrives from Vermont to South Carolina and completely covers itself in pale pink, spicy-scented flowers for weeks in March and April. After the flowers are finished, one quick trim with the hedge shears is all that is needed to keep the blue-gray evergreen leaves looking great for the rest of the year. Bath's Pink dianthus thrives in full sun and well-drained soil and looks great growing at the feet of purple leaved loropetalums or used as a groundcover along a walkway.

Columbines are a classic spring flower. Our native columbine, *Aquilegia canadensis*, has very delicate red and yellow blooms, but the hybrids are much flashier, with larger flowers in shades of red,

pink, purple, blue, white, yellow, pink and many bicolors. They prefer partial shade and moist soil and reseed themselves well, so you'll always have plenty to start new colonies or to share with friends.

If you'd like to grow something your neighbor probably won't have, try *Bletilla striata*. This hardy orchid is native to Asia and is easy to grow if provided with shade and average to moist soil. The flowers are magenta or white, and some varieties have a white stripe down the edge of each leaf. They give an exotic yet delicate look to the shade garden, and combine well with hostas and ferns.

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