



*Amelanchier canadensis*

Where I grew up, in Connecticut, the amelanchiers bloomed before any tree in the woods came into leaf – creating mounds of white visible from far away. Hot on the heels of the flowers come the leaves, a soft copper at first gradually turning green. Edible purple berries appear in summer, and in autumn the whole tree turns yellow. Usually grown as a multi-stemmed large shrub, it casts only a light shade so is kind to gardeners.

**Height** 6m.  
**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade.  
**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 4a-8b†.  
**Origin** North America.  
**Season of interest** April and October.



Derry Watkins is the owner of Special Plants nursery near Bath, specialplants.net

# April plants

As spring gets into its stride, Derry Watkins chooses a favourite tree and some delicate bulbs and blooms that are at their best in April

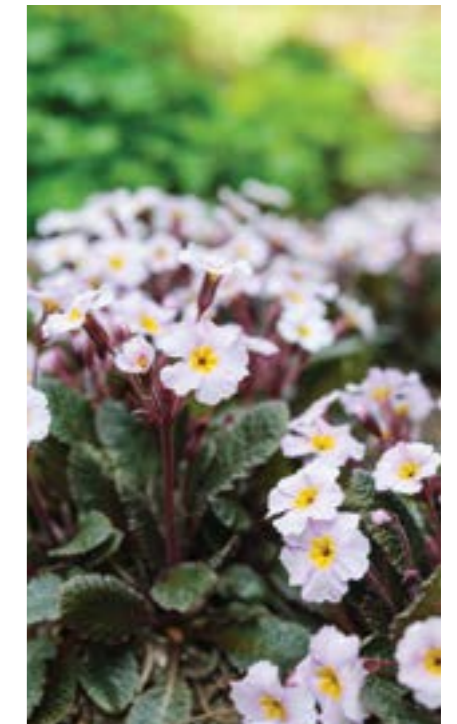
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*Smyrnium perfoliatum*

The acid-yellow bracts and flowers are a sight for sore eyes on rainy days. Rarely seen in nurseries because it is dormant for ten months of the year, and no one wants to buy an empty pot, especially when you tell them that it dies after blooming. But you only need one to flower in your garden to have it forever. It seeds profusely and the seedlings are so undistinguished it is impossible to weed them all out. They take a few years to flower, but then there will be loads, never a problem as they disappear so early leaving the stage for later arrivals.

**Height** 60-90cm.  
**Growing conditions** Sun or shade.  
**Hardiness** RHS H5, USDA 6a-10b.  
**Origin** Widespread, Europe, North Africa and South East Asia.  
**Season of interest** April – May.



*Primula 'Guinevere'*

A primrose by any other name. But one with dark, purple-flushed leaves and dark-red stems that show off the subtle grey-pink flowers to perfection. The leaves are attractive long after the flowers have faded, in fact they usually survive long into the winter. Although this pretty plant does not seed like ordinary primroses it is easy to divide immediately after flowering. Just tear them apart and put them where you want them to grow. AGM\*.

**Height** 12cm.  
**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade, not too dry.  
**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 4a-9b.  
**Origin** Bred in Ireland in the 1950s (originally called 'Garryard Guinevere').  
**Season of interest** Spring.

*Narcissus 'Thalia'*

My favourite narcissus. It has two or three nodding flowers on each stem, that are not so big as to be vulgar, but neither are they so small you need to get down on all fours and assume the prayer position simply to admire them. The gently swept-back petals give it elegance and grace. They open a soft creamy white, gradually becoming purer and purer white. Gently fragrant, it is lovely as a cut flower. Fairly late blooming, it is great planted en masse, like a late snow has fallen on green grass. It looks delicate, tasteful and restrained, but it is remarkably stalwart, slowly increasing every year.

**Height** 30-40cm.  
**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade.  
**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.  
**Origin** Garden hybrid 1916, UK.  
**Season of interest** March – April.



\*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. †Hardiness ratings given where available.





*Epimedium x versicolor*  
'Sulphureum'

Epimediums are some of the best ground covers for dry shade. They are slow but unstoppable, overwhelming any competition within their boundaries. For me, the most vigorous is this one with its pale-yellow flowers. The evergreen leaves are red-flushed in spring and autumn. Usually you cut the old leaves off in February to see the flowers, which emerge in March and April, and admire the new red leaves as they unfurl immediately after.

**Height** 40cm.

**Growing conditions** Partial shade, likes good soil, but tolerates dry conditions.

**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**Origin** 19th-century hybrid between European and Japanese species.

**Season of interest** Year round.



*Cardamine pratensis*  
'Flore Pleno'

*Cardamine pratensis* is lady's smock, a British native commonly found in damp fields. Its demure, pale-pink, noddling flowers are a joy. But its rather more flirtatious, double-flowered cousin is a better garden plant. It doesn't seed but slowly wanders in sun or light shade as long as it's not too dry. Being double, the flowers stay on longer and are more showy. Unfortunately, the foliage is very similar to hairy bittercress so easy to weed out by mistake, on the other hand it is edible.

**Height** 30cm.

**Growing conditions** Partial shade, not too dry.

**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 4a-7b.

**Origin** 17th-century sport discovered in UK.

**Season of interest** April – May.



*Zaluzianskya ovata*

A flower worthy of a Bond movie; a South African plant with an unpronounceable Russian name. Absolutely ravishing, too pretty to be real. Each petal is red outside and white inside, so the little, round buds are bright red. The flowers open white and then close up into their bud in the afternoon and open again in the evening when they release a lovely scent. I thought it was tender when I bought it but I left one in the rockery three years ago and it is still there.

**Height** 15cm.

**Growing conditions** Full sun, good drainage.

**Hardiness** RHS H4, USDA 9a-10b.

**Origin** South Africa.

**Season of interest** April – June.

*Lathyrus vernus* 'Filigree'

*Lathyrus vernus* is a lovely, small, early blooming herbaceous pea. It can be pink, white or blue. Occasionally, you get sports of it that have very narrow leaves. Mine is one of these. The thread-like leaves (it used to be known as 'Filicifolius') are charming on their own but the flowers are astonishing, purple buds produce brilliant-blue flowers. Even better, a month later deep-red seedpods stand up to attention just above the leaves. We grow them from seed and each one is different, and each one charming in its own way.

**Height** 30cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade, well-drained.

**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 3a-9b.

**Origin** Europe.

**Season of interest** April – June.



*Brunnera macrophylla*  
'Jack Frost'

Pretty, little, forget-me-not flowers in April. Beautiful silver leaves netted with green get bigger and bigger as summer goes on. Given enough food and water the leaves can be magnificent, making good ground cover, and long outlast the flowers. They need a rich, deep, humusy soil and an ample supply of water to look their best – but are worth it. *B. macrophylla* 'Looking Glass' is almost the same, but with solid, silver leaves that shimmer in the shade.

**Height** 40cm.

**Growing conditions** Shade, good soil, not too dry.

**Hardiness** RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

**Origin** A micropropagation sport introduced by Walters Gardens, Michigan, in 2000.

**Season of interest** Spring and summer.

*Erysimum* 'Parish's'

Perhaps the best perennial wallflower. Rich, red-purple flowers on trailing stems from April through September. Like all *erysimums* it needs to be renewed from cuttings every so often but plants will bloom well for three to four years. RHS *Plant Finder* insists on 'Parish's' because that's how the cultivar was spelled in the first published version. But the man who discovered it wanted it to be called by his mother's maiden name, Parrish, so in my nursery we spell it with two 'r's.

**Height/spread** 50cm x 90cm.

**Growing conditions** Full sun, good drainage.

**Hardiness** RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

**Origin** Accidental sport occurred near Bath in the 1990s.

**Season of interest** April – September.



Places to visit

Derry shares some of her favourite places to see plants at their best.

**Cricklade North Meadow**, just north of Swindon, is an ancient undisturbed hay meadow, that's been managed for its wildflowers by the residents of the nearby village for hundreds of years. It's now a National Nature Reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest and it has one of the largest collections of *Fritillaria meleagris* in the UK. Most of the wild fritillaries in Britain



Cricklade North Meadow

are here. In April it is a field of exquisite purple-checked, square-shouldered noddling blooms. Worth coming across the country for, but check the website to see when they are at their best. Cricklade, Wiltshire. [crickladeinbloom.co.uk/north\\_meadow.html](http://crickladeinbloom.co.uk/north_meadow.html)

**Greencombe, near Porlock**, is home to Joan Lorraine. She has been gardening here for almost

50 years, on an acid, wet, north-facing slope under mature trees. Naturally, she specialises in woodland plants, and has the national collections of *Erythronium*, *Polystichum*, *Vaccinium* and *Gaultheria* – she's clearly a great plantswoman. These days, no longer able to garden herself, she sits by the entrance in her wheelchair but she can still tell you the name of

every plant in the garden. Something wonderful to see here every day from April through July, but the *erythroniums* are mouth-watering in April. Greencombe, Porlock, Minehead, Somerset TA24 8NU. Tel 01643 862363, [greencombe.org.uk](http://greencombe.org.uk)

**Coton Manor in Northamptonshire** has one of the best bluebell woods in England. The lovely grey



Coton Manor

trunks of beech trees rise from a sea of blue as far as the eye can see. The filtered light through the newly unfolding leaves gives the bluebells an added delicacy. Check the website for the best moment to visit. The nearby garden is also worth seeing at almost any time of the year. Coton Manor, Coton, Northampton NN6 8RQ. Tel 01604 740219, [cotonmanor.co.uk](http://cotonmanor.co.uk)