

HEPATICAS

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Hepaticas may be small, but they are beautiful. In fact, these amazing little plants have stirred the passions of serious gardeners for centuries, including William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll, renowned 19th and 20th century experts. In recent years, hepaticas have fallen from favour in European gardens, but in Japan, where small plants are more appreciated, they command massive prices, similar to the high prices paid for tulips in the 17th century.

But things may be about to change, as there seems to be a renewed fascination with winter and early-season colour in the garden. Like most plants in the buttercup family, the flowers of hepaticas are very 'plastic' and stand up well in the garden. There is a huge array of flower types, including doubles like the variable *H. nobilis*, with pink or red blooms. There are at least twelve species and several varieties of hepatica, but few are widely available.

Hepatica flowers, held on stems 4-6in. tall, are rather less showy than those of anemones, to which they are closely related. They are distinguished from anemones by the ruff of three bracts just beneath the flower head; anemones carry them further down the stem. Hepaticas come in many colours; the soft, pale pastels are the ones I find most appealing. What is even better is that they are early spring-flowering, doing their stuff in March and April. Many types are easy to grow in a shady spot and free draining neutral to alkaline soils.

Hepaticas are natives of the Northern hemisphere. The American and Japanese forms are a little more difficult to grow, because they don't like wet winters. The American forms are *H. americana* and *H. acutiloba*. The latter is a wonderful plant with very upright stems, but it is best grown in a pot, and both species can be tricky in a garden. It is a bit unclear as to how many Asiatic species there are: *H. japonica* (similar to *H. nobilis*); *H. asiatica*, plus the similar *H. insularis*; *H. maxima*, with large leaves, and *H. yamatutai*. There is also a Himalayan species that is really something between an anemone and a hepatica, called *H. falconeri*. The two European forms are *H. nobilis* and *H. transsilvanica*.

I have had the best results in my garden with *H. transsilvanica*. In the wild, it makes large clumps up to 30cm across. It is not so vigorous in my garden but still makes larger clumps than other hepaticas; easy to grow, I find it does well in dry shade or even in slightly sunnier spots. Hepaticas need free-draining soil, rich in leaf litter and gravel to improve drainage. *H. transsilvanica* is available in blue, pinks and whites. Good varieties are *H. transsilvanica* 'Loddon Blue' (pale blue); 'Lilacina' which is pink, and 'Elison Spence', a semi-double blue. I have just bought this year, from Tatton RHS Show, *H. x media* 'Harvington Beauty', which is British bred, and a vigorous blue. I have found white forms of hepatica less vigorous in the garden. My favourite hepatica and one of the very first I bought, over thirty years ago, is *H. x media* 'Ballardii'. It is floriferous and has sky-blue flowers; I bought it from Mrs Robinson of Tickton, from her wonderful nursery long since gone.

Outside shows, it is not that easy to track down hepaticas. Pot-grown plants can be found in quite a few specialist nurseries, but if the nursery tries to charge you in yen, check that you've asked for the right variety.