

PULMONARIAS - A TALK BY SALLY-ANN TURNER

Karen Sparrow

Accompanied by some excellent photos, Sally-Ann Turner's lecture to the HPS Essex Group in September 2015 provided us with some very interesting information about this genus from the borage family. Most pulmonarias are spring-flowering woodlanders and grow best in a humus-rich, moist (but not boggy) soil in dappled shade, although some (especially seedlings) prefer growing in some sun. They have been cultivated since the 16th century, and were given the common name of 'lungwort', as the plant leaves looked like diseased lungs. The popular thought at the time was that plants which resembled diseases should be used to treat the illnesses they characterised. The name *Pulmonaria* (from the Latin 'pulmo' meaning lung) was first used by the German physician Leonard Fuchs (1501-1566).



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Pulmonaria angustifolia

The common *Pulmonaria officinalis* has blue and pink flowers, and because of this its other common names include 'soldiers and sailors'; 'boys and girls'; 'Adam and Eve'; 'Joseph and Mary' and - due to the spotting on the leaves - 'spotted dog'. *Pulmonaria* flowers are particularly good as feeding stations for insects, so they are a welcome sight for bees, moths, butterflies and other insects out early in the year.

Pulmonarias have two seasons of interest: flowers in spring, and foliage (often ornamental) in summer. Plants produce flowers on coreline stems, accompanied by leaves which are not the same as those that appear in the summer. Once the plant has flowered, cutting the flowering stems down to the ground encourages attractive basal leaves to appear in summer. This also helps prevent mildew attacking the plants. There is a wide variation in *pulmonarias* and many of them not only provide lovely flowers but also interesting foliage. They are highly recommended as replacements for hostas in the borders, as they do not get eaten by slugs or snails! Regular watering and feeding encourages them to grow well and perform at their best.

At first glance, *pulmonarias* can look very similar to one another. However, on closer inspection it becomes evident that there are two types of flowers: pin-eyed, which have short stamens on long styles, and thrum-eyed, which have long stamens on short styles. There are an estimated ten to eighteen species in the wild, but some are very difficult to identify individually and many hybridise readily, so it is not always possible to differentiate species accurately. The known cultivated species are: *P. angustifolia*; *P. officinalis*; *P. longifolia*; *P. saccharata*; *P. mollis*, and *P. rubra*.

- *P. angustifolia* has no spotting on its dark green leaves, and bears superb blue flowers.
- *P. longifolia* is a rare British native. It has long narrow leaves with a blue/purple flower. 'Ankum', bred by Dutchman, Coen Jansen, is usually grown for its beautiful, heavily-silvered foliage.
- *P. officinalis* has heart-shaped, spotted leaves and tends to have blue or pink flowers. However, there are some white varieties; one being 'White Wing' with pale pink-centred flowers. This plant is rarely available and is not a very good doer. A very pretty cultivar is 'Blue Mist'.

Previously known by two other names: 'Bold Blue' and 'Blue Moon' - it has now been officially named 'Blue Mist'. It has pale blue flowers and lightly spotted leaves.

- *P. rubra*, with its red flowers and plain green foliage, is usually the first to flower, with flowers appearing as early as December, giving it the name of the Christmas cowslip or Bethlehem sage. The variety 'Bowles Red', named after E. A. Bowles, has faint spotting on the leaves and rosy pink flowers. Variegated 'David Ward' is named after the garden director of Beth Chatto's garden, who found just one variegated stalk and managed to propagate plants from a cutting, but Sally-Ann found it hard to grow. However, a newer variegated form - 'Rachel Vernie' - discovered by the author of an HPS booklet on pulmonarias, Jennifer Hewitt, and named after one of her daughters, did much better. The leaves are a darker green than those of 'David Ward', with cream margins. The only white in this group is *P. rubra* var. *albo corollata*, which grows vigorously.

- *P. saccharata* generally has sugary-milky blotches, with some spots on its longer leaves. 'Leopard' is an old cultivar, introduced by Graham Stuart Thomas, and has lovely red, occasionally purple flowers. However, there are some rogue plants around claiming to be 'Leopard', and these have blue flowers, not red. Another good doer is 'Reginald Kaye' which has blue/pink flowers. 'Alba' is a pure white form.

If the specific parentage of some pulmonarias is not known, then the plants are given a cultivar name, as in the case of *P. 'Majeste'*, which has pretty blue and pink spring flowers, followed by superb silver leaves in the summer. Silver-leaved types do not thrive in full sun, as they tend to burn.



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P. 'Blue Mist'



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P. 'Rachel Vernie'



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P. 'Leopard'

In conclusion, Sally-Ann talked us through a sequence of photos of her favourite pulmonarias, including the popular, deep-blue flowered *P. angustifolia* 'Blue Ensign', with its darkish green leaves, and a tall, floriferous, rich blue variety, *P. saccharata* 'Lewis Palmer' (named after the Hon. Lewis Palmer, a famous plantsman from Highdown, in Sussex). An old cultivar, 'Mary Mottram', which has pink/blue flowers and silver-spotted summer foliage, was given to her by a good and dear departed friend. Sally-Ann also recommended the well-named 'Opal' ('Ocupol') which has very pretty pale blue flowers and lovely silvered foliage, and the azure blue, cascading 'Trevi Fountain', one of many introductions by Dan Hines from America.

To find out more, why not join the HPS Pulmonaria Group? They meet once a year, in different places around the country.

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