

# ERYTHRONIUMS

*John Sirkett*

With the difficulties of this year, it is easy to overlook things going on in the garden. However, a wet winter followed by a sunny spring have proved to be excellent conditions for many of the woodland plants that prosper in Cornwall. In particular, I have been struck by the beauty of the erythroniums this year. They started into growth during the wet period and produced large, lush rosettes of leaves, and as the buds opened the sun came out, highlighting their colour and delicate shapes, like illuminated lanterns.

Erythroniums do very well in the south west; there is a good collection of hybrids at The Garden House in Devon and, just down the road from there, Keith Wiley has been hybridising the genus to introduce a range of new cultivars at Wildside.



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*Erythronium dens-canis* 'Old Aberdeen'

The dog's tooth violet, *Erythronium dens-canis*, is the only species to be found in Europe. It occurs in a broad strip across southern Europe, stretching from Portugal to the Ukraine, and there are a number of named colour forms in cultivation. The name dog's tooth violet comes from the peculiar shape of the white bulbs, which often come to a sharp point at one end. I find *E. dens-canis* more difficult to establish than the American species, but once it is growing it seems to be reliably perennial. My clumps are only increasing slowly but they are increasing.

The flowers are usually a shade of lilac, but many white forms have been named and there are also pink ones. The Dutch grow them in huge numbers, so there are several forms that are cheaply available at the end of summer, both in the garden centres and through bulb catalogues. It is one of the earliest species to emerge and provides a welcome glow of warm pink in the first days of March as the snowdrops are waning. I have seen it cultivated in rough grass but, to be honest, I wasn't impressed. They look best bursting from the bare ground in a precious corner.



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*E. umbilicatum*

There are a number of other small-growing species that are worth considering. *E. umbilicatum* comes from the southeastern USA, growing in the mountains set back behind the coastal plain. The small yellow flowers have a red tinged reverse to the outer tepals, which do not reflex in the same way as other species. Instead, they nod demurely with just a flash of yellow visible through the dark skirts. I have struggled with it, but it grows magnificently at RHS Rosemoor, where it has spread into a colony a couple of metres wide. It seems to enjoy the humus-rich soil and the moisture seeping out of the ground at the bottom of the slope.

*E. albidum* is another one of the species from the eastern coast of the USA, though in this case its distribution reaches north into Canada. The small white flowers

also have a dark reverse and can appear grey in the low light of March. If the sun shines then the flowers reflex widely, revealing the sparkling white interior. It grows well in deep, moist soils and is one of the species that will spread into wide carpets in the right conditions.

The larger growing species and hybrids that we are used to seeing in our gardens come from the other side of the USA. The West Coast species tend to produce rounded clumps of leaves with clusters of tall spikes bearing reflexed flowers for several weeks in April. *E. californicum* comes from the mountains of northern California, where it grows in moist woodland beside streams. Although individual plants do not spread very far, it can carpet large areas of ground in its natural habitat, spreading by seed. It hasn't performed the same delightful feat in my garden yet (and I don't think it is going to) but it does produce seed, and if it is harvested and grown on in a pot then it



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*E. albidum*

can be increased fairly easily.

*E. tuolumnense* is another Californian species, though much rarer. It occurs only in a small area of Tuolumne County, along a single road. Fortunately, it is easily grown and the plant is very secure in cultivation, being both easily and cheaply available. It is the first of the west coast species to flower with me. The pure chrome yellow flowers appear just



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*E. californicum*

as *E. dens-canis* is fading. The first bloom to open always seems to be eaten by a slug, but it can't taste good because it is rarely troubled after that.

Moving north into the mountains of Oregon, *E. oregonum* can have some of the best mottled leaves in the genus, with rich chestnut and green marbling the rosettes. The tall spikes produce white flowers, often with a golden-yellow heart. It is another species which sets seed easily, but seems to need some help to establish seedlings. Seed germinates easily in any good seed compost, and after the leaves of the tiny seedlings die down in the first summer the whole thing can be planted out to flower in a couple of years' time.

Seed is an important consideration with erythronium. Many of the species - especially those from the West Coast of the USA - will hybridise freely, and in recent decades a large number of new cultivars have been named and distributed. I particularly like the pink flowered hybrids. 'Rosalind' is delightful, the pink exterior fading to white in the centre, and 'Janice' has been very vigorous in the



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*E. oregonum*

garden. My single bulb has made a decent clump in only three years. My current favourite is 'Craigton Cover Girl' selected by Ian Young [see, appropriately, front cover].



*E. 'Joanna'*

*E. 'Joanna'* combines yellow and pink in a way that you might not expect to be delightful; however, it works and it's a good strong grower.

'Margaret Mathew' has also been vigorous here, producing masses of white flowers tinged with yellow. It was originally raised by E. B. Anderson but named by Kath Dryden.



Many of the newer cultivars are available at Alpine Garden Society shows during the flowering season, and some of them are starting to appear in bulb catalogues. Hartside Nursery in Cumbria also specialise in the genus and plants are available by mail order. However, if you like a cup of coffee while browsing for plants, Harvington Nursery have produced a number of hybrid erythroniums that are being sold through garden centres. 'Harvington Snowgoose', 'Harvington Sunshine' and 'Harvington Wild Salmon' have all grown well here. Possibly 'Harvington Snowgoose' has been the most vigorous, but they have all been good.



*E. 'White Beauty'*

I am sure that every garden can find space for a few erythronium. However, the genus has a further trick up its sleeve. If you have space, they can be planted en masse, covering the ground in light shade and giving a magnificent display. The Dutch have been very efficient in mass producing them and there are now a few cultivars that can be bought cheaply enough to repay a bit of extravagance. I am lucky that my birthday falls just as the bulb catalogues appear, and a few years ago I bought myself two hundred bulbs of *E. 'Pagoda'* from one of the wholesale catalogues. It cost about as much as it does to fill the van with diesel; even at the time, I thought that was good value. Now, as they bloom in waves under the trees, they are spectacularly good value. If you're keen to see the effect, RHS Wisley has massed plantings of 'Pagoda' which provide an astonishing display in spring.

*E. 'White Beauty'* is a little more expensive, but a hundred bulbs is still a modest investment: no more than you would pay for a couple of rhododendrons or a decent magnolia. I have a little patch growing under some camellias and every year I mean to add

to them (and every year I get distracted by other things).

Finally, there is *E. revolutum*, the pink fawn lily, from the north-west coast of the USA, where it grows along stream banks and in moist ground. It is still too expensive for me to buy in bulk but it is one of the best species for self-seeding. Some HPS members may know the large mass that can be seen under the trees at Knightshayes Court, near Tiverton. A single plant will increase quite rapidly in suitable conditions. It likes light shade and a moist, humus rich soil, but when suited it will spread as enthusiastically as bluebells. My first generation seedlings flowered this year and my hopes are high!



*E. revolutum*

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