

PULSATILLA

Sue Hough

The name pulsatilla comes from the Latin for 'pulsing', plus the diminutive *illa*, meaning 'a bit of quivering' (from the wind). It usually comes into flower around Easter time, hence the common name of pasque flower, which translates from the Hebrew *paskah* meaning 'Passover'.

Pulsatilla vulgaris has been adopted by Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire as their county flower. The provincial state flower of Manitoba in Canada is *P. patens*, and *P. vernalis* is the county flower of Oppland in Norway.

The pulsatilla family comprises over 33 species, many of which are found in the meadows and prairies of North America, Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, there has been a 49% reduction in wild species of pulsatilla; the UK is addressing this situation by introducing a biodiversity plan, which, hopefully, will stem the decline.

Pulsatillas are used in some homeopathic medicines, and extracts from the plant have been used to treat premenstrual symptoms. However, this plant is highly toxic and it can slow the heart rate in humans; if used in excess, it can cause diarrhoea, vomiting and convulsions. The Native American Indians are thought to have used it to induce abortions.

There are many myths relating to this delightful spring flower. One rather macabre observation is that they can often be found growing in old barrows and boundary banks, where the ground is said to have been soaked with the blood of invading Romans or Danes.

Pulsatilla alpina

As its name suggests, *P. alpina* can be found growing in the mountains of central and southern Europe. It grows to a height of 15 to 30 cm and has a more upright habit than other species. Its white flowers have bright yellow stamens and often appear very early in spring, even opening while there is still a covering of snow. Once the flowers fade, the beautiful silky seed heads shimmer in the early spring sunlight for many weeks.

P. alpina is best grown in a rock garden in gritty soil and full sun. They are very hardy, but hate winter wet, so some overhead protection from rain is required.

Pulsatilla koreana

The Korean pasque flower is used in its native country as a herbal medicine. Blooming in spring, this hairy, tufted species of pulsatilla bears nodding stems of red to purple, bell-shaped flowers which are pollinated by insects. It requires a light loamy, sandy, moist soil to grow well, but will not tolerate shade. There is an a traditional folktale from this plant's homeland of Korea:

Long ago, there lived a widow who had two daughters. The eldest daughter became the wife of a wealthy merchant but the younger married a man of simple means. The widow grew old and frail, and decided to visit her two daughters. However, her eldest would not allow her into her house, so the widow set out to her younger daughter's house, many miles away over the mountains. The journey was hard and the old widow eventually fell by the wayside, suffering from exhaustion and fatigue. The younger daughter found her mother lying there weak and cold, but as she held her in her arms, her mother died. Stricken with grief, the daughter buried her mother in her garden.

The following spring, the daughter noticed a flower blooming on her mother's grave, a flower whose stem was as bent as her mother's back, its head nodding in the breeze. The daughter wept, as she believed the pasque flower was her own mother returning in the form of a 'grandmother flower'.



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P. alpina ssp. apiifolia



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P. patens



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P. koreana

Pulsatilla patens

Also known as the eastern pasque flower or prairie crocus. It is native to Europe, Russia, Mongolia, China, Canada and the USA. *P. patens* appeared in Finland as the continental ice receded, but it struggled to survive in this inhospitable terrain of forest and bog and then, to make things worse, homo sapiens found its beautiful large flowers irresistible and dug it up for their gardens!

In 1952, Finland brought in the Nature Conservation Act to stem the decline of *P. patens*, and it can still be found growing in some areas today on sunny rock slopes around the city of Hämeenlinna in southern Finland.

Springtime is when *P. patens* can be seen growing through the melting snow of the sub-alpine meadows, from northern Europe to Siberia; and in the USA, from Alaska down to New Mexico. The blue-violet, occasionally white, flowers appear before the silvery, hairy, fern-like foliage. The single flowers are erect to 10 cm tall, and as they fade they resemble the iridescent seed heads of clematis.

Pulsatilla vulgaris

The popular *P. vulgaris*, which most of us have growing in our gardens, bring much pleasure early in the year; their soft silver-grey-green hairy leaves showing off their bell-shaped purple flowers. On fading, they produce stunning silky seed heads which last for many months.

Its natural habit is sparsely wooded pine forests, or meadows with sunny slopes and calcium-rich soil. They can be seen today growing in the wild, at the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust's Pasque Flower reserve in the Cotswolds and also at Barnack Hills and Holes in Cambridgeshire.



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P. vulgaris