

# Good Garden Primroses



**A**FTER A LONG dreary winter here in southern Wisconsin, I crave color. Pushing up new green leaves in early spring and promising to deliver that glorious color in my garden is the humble primrose (*Primula* spp.). The common name for the genus derives from medieval Latin meaning “first rose,” because these are among the first flowers of spring.

Many people’s experience with primroses is based on those plants offered as impulse purchases at garden centers and grocery stores in February and March. These greenhouse-raised plants bloom gloriously for a few days indoors and then usually pine away. That’s not at all the case with the garden primroses I’m going to be discussing, which, given favorable

Every gardener deserves at least one of these splendid, hardy, early-blooming perennials in their landscape.

BY DEAN WIEGERT

**The jewellike flowers of polyanthus primroses like the ones above help explain why primroses have long been a favorite with gardeners and poets alike.**

growing conditions are perennial, coming back reliably year after year.

## THE GENUS PRIMULA

More than 400 primrose species have been identified, primarily located in the Northern Hemisphere. Most of these are native to the eastern Himalayas and western China, but there are also significant numbers found in mountain and high-altitude regions in other areas of Asia, Europe, and North America. Habitats range from temperate grasslands and woodlands to alpine scree and high mountain water meadows. While the majority of these wild species have very specific requirements that would be hard to satisfy in American gardens, several primrose species have been cultivated in



Yellow-flowered oxlips (*Primula elatior*) bloom earlier in spring than common primroses.

gardens since at least the 16th century. My goal is to introduce you to an assortment that can thrive in many regions of North America, adding color, fragrance, and interest from early spring to mid-summer, depending on species.

*Primula* is a large and diverse genus whose species are grouped into 37 taxonomic sections based on form and habit. To simplify this article on garden-worthy plants, however, I've followed the lead of others by grouping plants into four basic categories based on similar types and similar cultural requirements. These are primroses, polyanthus, and julianas; candelabra primroses; woodland primroses; and drumstick and belled primroses.

North American gardeners tend to use "primrose" to refer to the entire group of plants belonging to the genus *Primula*. Europeans, however, use "primula" as the common name for most species and hybrids within the genus, while "primrose" is generally reserved for one species, *P. vulgaris*. For the purposes of this article, I am using primrose as the common name for all species.

### PRIMROSES, OXLIPS, COWSLIPS, POLYANTHUS, AND JULIANAS

This group contains some of the most commonly grown primroses. Although these are generally smaller plants, their brightly colored flowers create a big im-

pression when planted in masses. That said, even singly they charm you into coming in for a closer look. As early bloomers (April/May), they can be grown between and at the base of larger perennials, that will provide them with shade later in the summer. From the bright lemon-yellow of cowslips to the intense jewel tones of the Barnhaven Cowichan strain, the diversity within this



Growing to about six inches tall, 'Sue Jervis' is a pink, double-flowered hybrid primrose.

## Resources

**American Primrose Society**, [www.americanprimrosesociety.org](http://www.americanprimrosesociety.org).

**Primrose** by Elizabeth Lawson. Reaktion Books, London, 2019.

**The Plant Lover's Guide to Primulas** by Jodie Mitchell & Lynne Lawson. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2016.

## Sources for Seeds

**American Primrose Society**, [www.americanprimrosesociety.org](http://www.americanprimrosesociety.org).

Annual winter seed exchange.

**Barnhaven Primroses**, [www.barnhaven.com](http://www.barnhaven.com).

The legendary nursery established in the 1930s by a founder of The American Primrose Society.

**North American Rock Garden Society**, [www.nargs.org](http://www.nargs.org).

Annual seed exchange.

## Sources for Plants

**Digging Dog Nursery**, [www.diggingdognursery.com](http://www.diggingdognursery.com).

**Far Reaches Farm**, [www.farreachesfarm.com](http://www.farreachesfarm.com).

**Sequim Rare Plants**, [www.sequimrareplants.com](http://www.sequimrareplants.com).

group means it's easy to find a desirable flower color and growing habit.

The true or common primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) is native to a broad swathe of Europe. The wild plants have pale yellow upward-facing blossoms that open in early spring (that's early May in my southern Wisconsin garden). Each flower rises on a separate stalk to about six inches tall from the base of a rosette of oblong light green leaves. Thanks to plant breeders, common primroses are now available in just about any color from white and yellow to red, blue, purple and almost black and double-flowered cultivars abound.

Closely related to common primrose are oxlips (*P. elatior*) and cowslips (*P. veris*). Oxlips bloom a bit earlier than common primrose, have similar colored yellow outward-facing flowers, all arranged on one side of flower stems about a foot tall. Cowslips bloom a bit later, have brighter yellow, bell-shaped, droop-

ing flowers suspended from a main flower stem about eight inches tall.

The three species hybridize readily, and the name polyanthus (*Primula × polyantha*) refers to a complex hybrid of these species. Polyanthus are generally larger plants, which can have bigger flowers arranged on flower stalks, like oxlips and cowslips, and come in a myriad of colors. A look at the website of the legendary nursery Barnhaven Primroses (see “Sources,” page 13) can leave you reeling with the choices in color combinations.

Juliana primroses, or Julianas (*Primula × pruhoniciana*), are hybrids of the common primrose with *P. juliae*, a creeping species that has roundish leaves. Juliana primroses are generally low-growing (under six inches), profuse bloomers, and vigorous growers. Some cultivars, like ‘Wanda’, create large masses with bright



Above: Polyanthus ‘You And Me Blue’ exhibits a flower form known as “hose-in-hose.” Right: A mass planting of Japanese primroses produces a striking groundcover.



wine-colored flowers so numerous they almost hide the leaves.

This group of primroses can be difficult to find at nurseries, but a wide variety are available as seed. For those searching for mature plants, the primrose group does have some stand-out named cultivars and seed strains (plants that come true from seed). Ones to look for include ‘Quaker’s Bonnet’, an old cultivar with lilac-colored double blossoms; ‘Petticoat’ and ‘Dawn Ansell’, which are both lovely white double-flowered cultivars; and ‘Sue Jarvis’, which offers double flowers of a peculiar pink color on graceful long stems. The Belarina line of double primroses bred by David Kerley in England comes in a wide range of colors on

sturdy well-shaped plants. ‘You And Me Blue’ is a true blue polyanthus primrose with flowers that have one set of petals set within another (you may see this phenomenon described as “hose-in-hose,” which is a reference to an Elizabethan fashion trend of wearing two different stockings one on top of the other).

‘Jay-Jay’, ‘Kinlough Beauty’, and ‘Lady Greer’ are three outstanding cultivars of Juliana primroses. ‘Jay-Jay’ has a velvety reddish-purple flower cupped with leafy sepals, ‘Kinlough Beauty’ features rosy pink flowers with a white stripe, and ‘Lady Greer’ is the essence of simple beauty with a profusion of creamy white, slightly drooping, flowers.

## CANDELABRA PRIMROSES

The “candelabra” moniker refers to the tall flower stems of species in this group, which are topped by stacked whorls of flowers. Plants in this group are overall larger than those in the primrose group, and flower a few weeks later. They make a bold statement, especially when massed. Originating in water meadows and mountain streams in Asia, these species appreciate moist, even wet, conditions. They can handle full sun in streamside or bog conditions, but can also thrive in a moist area of the garden as long as they are shaded from hot summer sun. The species in this group are promiscuous, so if you grow

them in close proximity be prepared for seedlings in an array of colors.

Japanese primrose (*P. japonica*) is perhaps the easiest primrose to grow, yet it never fails to impress with robust lettuce-like leaves and sturdy flower stems that can grow to two feet or more in height. It blooms for several weeks starting about mid-June. Easily grown from seed, its flowers can be white, pink, red or purple, with variations of shading in these colors. You can purchase seed strains that have been isolated for specific colors—such as ‘Apple Blossom’, ‘Miller’s Crimson’, and ‘Postford White’—but I love a mixed-color planting where the effect can be as bold and fresh as peppermint candy. I like to grow this species at the back of a bed so that when it is finished blooming, other later blooming plants will grow up in front of it. A prolific self-seeder, it can cover large areas, but any seedlings are easy to remove from anywhere they aren’t wanted.

Another candelabra, *P. ×bulleesiana*, is a cross between the purple-flowered *P. bulleyana* and the orange-flowered *P. beesiana*. The result is an almost alchemical transmutation into yellow, orange, pink, red, or mauve flowers. A planting of *P. ×bulleesiana*, flowers stacked in whorls over two-feet tall, can look like an artist’s rendering of a sunset. *P. ×bulleesiana* blooms just after Japanese primrose and can flower well into July. Give this group of plants a moist to wet garden site for best effect. The drier the area, the more shade they will need.

## WOODLAND PRIMROSES

This group of Asian species, hardy in USDA Zones 4–8 or colder, grow well in average garden conditions as long as they receive part shade and regular moisture during active growth. These species are grouped as “woodland” primroses because they thrive in humus-rich soil and the dappled shade of deciduous trees. They are uncommon enough to elicit questions from other gardeners without being rare or hard to grow, so I highly recommend them.

*Primula kisoana* is rhizomatous and can make a loose groundcover of fuzzy, shallow-lobed, heart-shaped leaves. It is said to love damp conditions, but I have grown it successfully in average-to-dry soil in shade. With eight- to 12-inch stems, *P.*



The candelabra inflorescences of *P. ×bulleesiana* come in an array of bright colors, including orange.

*kisoana* blooms in colors of white, light pink, and a dark red-purple. It spreads slowly, but far from being a thug, coexists happily with other species, filling in the gaps. It blooms in early spring, about the

same time as cowslips and primroses, but lasts longer, blooming for about a month.

*Primula cortusoides* grows about eight inches high in clumps with oval, crinkly green leaves and has flower stems that rise to 16 inches. It has clear pink flowers in clusters of up to 10 or more per stem. It blooms slightly later than *P. kisoana*, but the two overlap. The whole plant has a delicate appearance, belying its hardiness. It also appreciates moisture, good drainage, and part shade, but I have grown it successfully in dryish areas in the north shadow of spruce trees.

*Primula polyneura* resembles *P. kisoana* in leaf shape and in its pink flowers, but is slightly smaller with flower stems about a foot tall. It is a clumper, not a spreader. It blooms just as *P. kisoana* and *P. cortusoides* are ending.

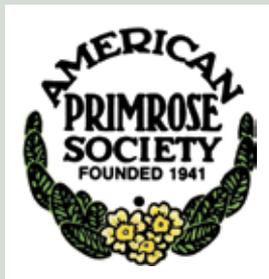
The pièce de résistance of the woodland group is Siebold primrose (*P. sieboldii*). This species comes in a mind-boggling variety of flower forms and white, pink, and lavender color variations. The leaves resemble those of *P. cortusoides* but are larger. The Japanese have cultivated this species for hundreds of years creating countless named varieties, many of which are available from mail-order nurseries. Growing from creeping rhizomes, it even-



*Primula kisoana* grows companionably with foamflower (*Tiarella* sp.), in this shade garden.

## AMERICAN PRIMROSE SOCIETY

Whether your interests include finding the perfect double primrose for you garden, growing plants from seed, collecting hard to find species for rock gardens, or breeding your own varieties, the American Primrose Society has something to offer, no matter your level of interest or experience.



Founded in 1941 by a group of enthusiasts in Portland, Oregon, the American Primrose Society has been bringing primula people together for over 80 years. Its stated mission is “to bring the people interested in Primula together...to increase the general knowledge of and interest in collecting, growing, breeding, showing and using in the landscape and garden the genus *Primula* in all its forms and to serve as a clearing house

for collecting and disseminating information about Primula.”

The society continues today with more than 120 members from around the world. Membership in the society has many benefits including:

- The journal *Primroses*, published four times a year in print and digital versions
- An inclusive seed exchange, which this year featured over 170 different species and varieties
- The annual National Primula show
- Exclusive website access to the last 12 issues of the *Primroses* journal online
- Membership in a great community, where enthusiasts share their interests, learn about primula, and build lasting friendships.

For more information on membership, visit [americanprimrosesociety.org](http://americanprimrosesociety.org).

tually forms large impressive clumps in the garden. It has umbels of five or more flowers on slender, 12-inch stems with petals that can be round-edged or frilly, drooping, or upward facing. Flowers can be of a single color, picotee, streaked with multiple colors, or have one color on the front and a different color on the reverse.

This species can provide plants for a large display of a single type or satisfy collectors with its endless variations. Siebold primrose can bloom for weeks from late spring to early summer. It goes dormant later in summer if conditions get too hot or dry, but returns the following spring.

### DRUMSTICK AND BELLED PRIMROSES

I have combined these two types of primroses not because they are similar, but because these are plants I encourage gardeners to try growing but can't wholeheartedly endorse because they are challenging to grow successfully unless you live in the Pacific Northwest or Alaska.

Native to the Himalayas, drumstick primrose (*P. denticulata*) blooms in early spring with a large pompon of blue, pink,

red, purple, or white flowers on a single stem about a foot tall. It requires cool temperatures and very moist soil to thrive but, where



**Belled primroses such as fragrant *P. alpicola* var. *violacea* require a cool, very moist climate for success.**

happy, will self-sow to create a colony. Winter snow cover is essential to longevity, but winter rainfall can be problematic.

The belled group of primroses blooms later than the candelabras, extending into midsummer. The species in this group appreciate very moist conditions and their flowers are delightfully fragrant. *Primula alpicola* has large bell-shaped flowers drooping at the end of 18-inch stems. Flower colors range from white and yellow to violet and purple. As their name suggests, giant cowslips (*P. florindae*) are very large, growing up to about four feet tall. The wild species, found in Tibet and western China, has lemon-yellow flowers, but orange and red seed strains are available.

### PLACEMENT AND CARE

All the species and varieties I've discussed can be successfully grown in USDA Hardiness Zones 3–7, with snow cover important for hardiness in the coldest areas. They are for the most part cool-weather and moisture-loving plants, but it's worth recalling that the renowned garden writer Elizabeth Lawrence extolled the virtues of primroses in her North Carolina garden. At the southern extent of their range, USDA Zones 7 and maybe 8, finding the ideal microclimate for primroses is crucial for success.

Primroses are ideal for filling an open spot that will later be in the shade of other perennials, shrubs, or trees. For most species, active growth slows down or stops altogether after bloom, so by late July and early August, some early blooming primroses can look pretty raggedy. In late summer and autumn, given cooler temperatures and more moisture, many of these plants will see a second growth spurt and development of new leaves.

A site in the dappled shade of deciduous trees would suit any of the primroses in this article and many of them will do fine given morning sun with shade after midmorning. In general, a garden position in full sun should be avoided. The one exception to this would be when growing the candelabra types in wet or marshy conditions.

In my experience, primroses aren't fussy about soil pH. A well-drained, high-humus soil will benefit most and an annual top dressing of aged manure, compost, or leaf mold just before growth starts in early spring will always be appreciated.

Regular water throughout the growing



season is necessary for all the types of primroses discussed here. In areas that experience summer drought, an inch of supplemental water a week will be beneficial. As mentioned earlier, Siebold primrose will lose its leaves and go dormant in dry conditions. The candelabra group requires the most water, so these primroses often succeed in wetter soils with less drainage. The common primrose group can do fine in clay soil, provided it is amended with organic matter and the site is neither waterlogged nor dried hard.

Unfavorable growing conditions—such as prolonged high summer temperatures, insufficient moisture, too much direct sun, etc.—will affect longevity of primroses. Some types will benefit from division every few years and all types except named cultivars are easy to grow from seed if you need to replace them.

## PROPAGATION

Primroses are easy to grow from seed. I use a free-draining, moisture-retentive,

**Deep pink Siebold primroses, center, are right at home among other shade-loving perennials in this woodland garden.**

soilless seed-starting mix and gain extra drainage by the addition of chicken grit or horticultural pumice in 3.5-inch square pots. I cover the growing medium with a thin layer of additional chicken grit and sow the tiny seeds directly onto the surface of the grit, watering with a rose or misting wand so that the seeds settle down between the particles. With well-stored fresh seed, germination for most of these plants will occur in less than three weeks.

I sow seeds in February under fluorescent lights in my cool basement, making sure temperatures don't rise above 64 degrees Fahrenheit. The growing medium must be kept moist at all times. I mist them daily and cover the pots with clear plastic until germination occurs. Once the first or second pair of true leaves appear, I prick out seedlings and transplant them into two-inch pots. By

mid-spring, I have plants ready to go out into garden beds or containers.

Established plants can be propagated by division. I generally wait until after flowering to divide, but avoid the heat of summer, when plants can sulk.

There are many reasons to grow primroses, starting with the amazing beauty and diversity of their flower colors. The primrose, oxlip, cowslip, polyanthus and Juliana groups are also known for having intriguing flower form variants such as doubles, Jack-in-the-greens (which have sepals made of leaf tissue so that each flower sits in a cup of leaves), and the aforementioned hose-in-hose. Gardeners worldwide have collected and treasured these plants for centuries, and now you have a chance to experience this wonder yourself.

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