

In Brief

What Spring-flowering woodlanders with flower, sepals and leaves arranged in threes or sometimes multiples of three. Some have stalkless flowers, while others bear slender stalks topped with small flowers.

Origins Debate rages about how many species there are, as many variations are found in the wild. There are around five or six native to eastern Asia, while the rest, around 43 species, are from North America.

Size Up to 60cm, but when happy trilliums will form wide clumps.

Conditions Rich loamy, humus-rich soil in light shade. A leaf litter mulch helps to keep the soil cool and may make the soil slightly acidic, which trilliums prefer.

Trillium grandiflorum

f. *polymerum* 'Flore Pleno'

The most desirable trillium of all for most gardeners, with double white flowers set above all-green foliage.

It's later than the single form and doesn't set seed because most forms are sterile. Propagation demands division and this makes it expensive, but the fully petalled flowers last much longer than the single forms. 45cm. RHS H5, USDA 3a-9b†.



Val Bourne is a garden writer and lecturer and judges plant trials at RHS Wisley.

I've had a life-long love of trilliums, captivating spring woodlanders with tricorns of leaf and flower. However it's been a bitter-sweet affair that began 50-odd years ago with some dried up rootstocks acquired from Woolworths. These shrivelled offerings were almost certainly plucked from the wild, in a less ethical era. They produced miserable plants so I moved on to other treasures, ones that would grow.

Twenty years ago I tried again, prompted by a trillium bought from an Alpine Garden Society show. I planted my pride and joy in the shade of a mature apple tree in my then dry garden on thin soil above ironstone. Friends in the same village, with better soil, had trilliums that expanded and self-seeded. But mine marked time for two or three years, and then went backwards. Trilliums need friable woodland soil that remains cool in summer. When I moved to a garden with a chilly climate and deep soil, I decided to try again and I've succeeded in a sheltered border created under witch hazels and mature trees.

This success is not only down to better growing conditions. Times have changed in the world of trilliums because collecting from the wild is no longer allowed. Luckily, former nurseryman Hugh Nunn grows plants and rhizomes raised from seed gathered from his own plants. Now retired, Hugh used to run a specialist nursery in Harvington near Evesham and has spent the past 30 years or so collecting, raising, selecting and naming trilliums. It's a slow process that can take up to ten years from seed to flowering plant. I know. When one of my own seedlings flowered I felt as though I'd given birth to twins. The long gestation means trilliums are expensive, but they're worth the price if you have the correct conditions of light shade and deep, friable soil. One of their common names, toadshade, conjures up just the right conditions.

The easiest for me is *T. kurabayashii* (see page 57), a North American species named in 1975 after the Japanese scientist Masataka ▶

JONATHAN BUCKLEY / GAPPHOTOS

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.

Trilliums

These shade-loving plants can be tricky to grow and are often pricey, but they are worth the extra effort and expense

WORDS VAL BOURNE PHOTOGRAPHS LYNN KEDDIE

▷ Kurabayashi who first identified it on the western coast of America. The sessile (stalkless) maroon flowers have three erect petals that rise upwards and nestle above three narrow bracts, which can be maroon. The large leaves, sometimes mottled, fill the gaps between the bracts and the whole arrangement is held on slightly splayed stalks so a good form of *T. kurabayashii* displays itself well in the garden. By late summer the seedpods resemble small, fleshy aubergines. I suspect the flowers are pollinated by flies as I've never seen a bee anywhere near mine. Some trilliums definitely have a meaty odour designed to attract flies, while others are sweetly fragrant bee magnets.

Trilliums are variable, even within wild populations so I'm planning to leave my fleshy trillium fruits to self seed on their own because some gardening friends further along the 'trillium road' get interesting seedlings. Hugh believes the genus is still evolving, hence the variation.

In the wild ants carry the ripe seeds away, attracted by the oily coating, so in theory seedlings can appear at considerable distance from the parent plant. Other good sessile trilliums for me include the beautifully fragrant *T. albidum* and *T. luteum*. I've found all three hardy and I hope to get hybrids, although not all species are compatible due to their differing chromosome counts.

I've done less well with forms of *T. grandiflorum* (see page 58), a really hardy species abundant enough in Ontario to be its provincial flower. The flowers are pedunculate, meaning they're held on stalks above the foliage. I have acquired single-flowered whites, double whites and pink singles and all flower in May and June, though not that happily. Perhaps my soil is too damp, for in the wild *T. grandiflorum* thrives on well-drained soil in beech and maple woods. My late friend Alan Bloom, who gardened near Diss in Norfolk, grew hundreds of *T. grandiflorum* in his often very dry, garden under heavy shading.

Hugh may have retired but his daughter Penny Dawson is continuing to provide trilliums through her online nursery Twelve Nunns. More reason than ever to try a trillium; you'll have a much greater chance of success than with a shrivelled one snatched from the wild. □

• Val's recommendations for trilliums continue over the next six pages.



T. erectum

This dainty trillium flowers early, and loves acid soil. Its petals (normally wine-red) and green sepals, are held on a stalk above bright foliage. Can suffer frost damage. 60cm. AGM*. RHS H5, USDA 4a-7b.



T. sulcatum

Broad-petalled, wine-red flowers, with quilled, dark and narrow sepals behind, are held on stalks above large, rounded leaves. The flowers, which curtsy slightly, smell musty and attract flies. 45cm. USDA 3a-9b.



***T. flexipes* 'Harvington Dusky Pink'**

A strong hybrid of *T. flexipes* and *T. sulcatum* that took Hugh Nunn ten years to select and raise. Its dusky pink flowers are framed by narrow, red-edged sepals, and the strong stems also have a pink-flush. 38cm.



T. vaseyi

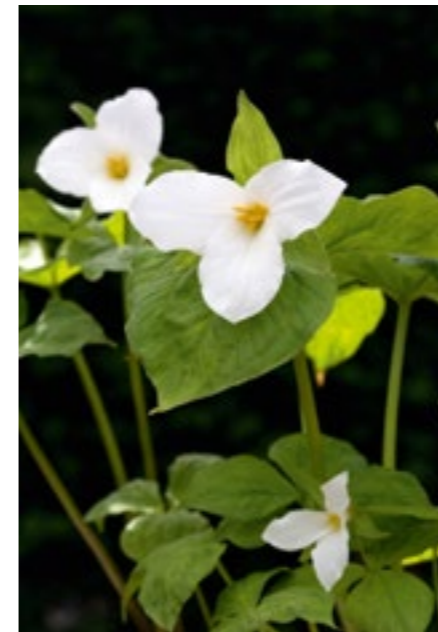
A sweetly fragrant, maroon-red trillium that carries its flowers under the foliage on an almost horizontal stalk making the flower look as though it's nodding. Hides its flowers perhaps a little too well. 60cm. USDA 5a-8b.



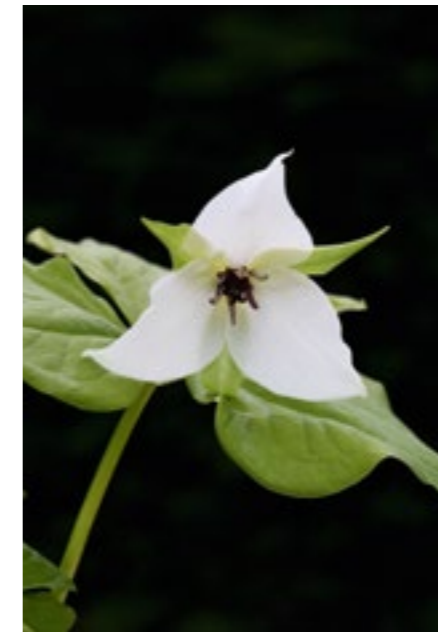
T. kurabayashii

A showy species with sultry red-to-purple bracts and sepals above strongly marked foliage. This particular form was sourced from Harvington Clone A, a seed-raised trillium, which means that variations can and do occur as is generally true for many seed-raised trilliums. 50cm.

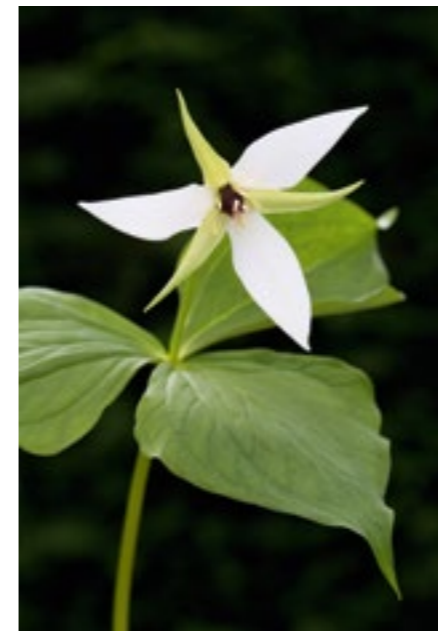
***T. flexipes* a Harvington selection**
A good selection from *T. flexipes* with rounded green foliage topped with cream-white flowers and a pale pink ovary (rather than the usual creamy-white one). This strong-growing trillium is tolerant of lime, being found naturally on wooded limestone slopes. 50cm.



T. grandiflorum
Possibly the best-loved trillium, with full-petaled, large, white flowers that can vary in size and are held on stems above dark-green foliage. Flowers later than many in May and June. 45cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 3a-9b.



T. simile
Each of its creamy-white flowers has an attractive dark eye in shades of purple and midnight-blue, resembling a miniature clematis flower. It clumps up well in humus-rich, damp soil. 45cm. USDA 3a-9b.



T. 'Harvington Star'
An elegant, creamy-white hybrid of *T. simile* (above right) and *T. flexipes* 'Harvington Selection' (left). Narrow petals, separated by slender green bracts, form starry flowers with a dark red ovary at the centre. 40cm.



T. albidum
A showy, early flowerer with freesia-scented, pale flowers and lily-green bracts set above green-veined, slightly ruffled foliage that can be splashed in shades of grey-brown and creosote. 50cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 3a-9b.

How to cultivate

For best results start off with good material, preferably a pot-grown trillium that has more than one flower, or you could buy a rhizome from a nursery specialising in trilliums.

- Trilliums, which need friable soil that holds moisture but is free-draining, are best grown under deciduous trees and shrubs. Provide shelter from summer sunshine and autumn winds, and give them space to shine. Dress with well-rotted leaf litter in late autumn, but do not cover the crowns.

- If you choose to plant rhizomes, these need to be planted as soon as they arrive, in friable soil enriched with leaf mould or leaf litter, and planted with their tip just below the surface.

- Feed your trilliums to keep them in leaf for as long as possible. Sprinkle a slow-release fertiliser, such as Vitax Q4 (vitax.co.uk), round them in late winter and then foliar feed them with seaweed extract.

- Ideally, clumps should be left undisturbed, but if you need to divide them, do so in May, June and July when the leaves are still attached.

- Seeds need to be sown when ripe. Plant societies, such as The Alpine Garden Society (alpinegardensociety.net), often have them on their seed list.

- You'll need patience if growing from seed. Nothing will appear for 18 months as trillium seeds need two warm spells and two cold spells. Eventually, single leaflets (reminiscent of a lily) will rise up and then go dormant within a month or so. The pot must be allowed to bake in summer and then be subjected to cold in winter. The process is repeated over several years, usually seven, before a flower appears. Nurserymen speed the process up by placing the tiny rhizomes in a refrigerator for six weeks, to shorten the dormancy period. They also score mature rhizomes behind the terminal bud to encourage new growth.

- Once established, trilliums endure without disease, but slugs will crop seedlings and plants. Once they emerge keep slugs at bay, as they can, and do, mar the foliage and flowers.

Suggested combinations

Trilliums work well with fellow woodlanders erythroniums, which flower at a similar time and enjoy similar conditions. *Erythronium californicum* 'White Beauty', *E. revolutum* 'Knights Hayes Pink' and *E.* 'Hidcote Beauty' make particularly good companions.

- Ferns, especially the black-bristled Himalayan form of *Dryopteris wallichiana*, also work well. Cut back in late-autumn it will produce new fiddle-necked fronds in late April without harbouring slugs (as polystichums can) or impinging on trillium growth. Maidenhair ferns also make good companions, because they become dormant during winter.

- Other good companions include hepaticas, *Sanguinaria canadensis*, snowdrops and hellebores.

Where to see

- **Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh**
Arboretum Place,
Edinburgh EH3 5NZ.
Tel 0131 248 2909,
rbge.org.uk

Where to buy

- **Edrom Nurseries**
School Road, Coldingham, Eyemouth,
Berwickshire TD14 5TZ.
Tel 01890 771386,
www.edrom-nurseries.co.uk

- **Twelve Nuns**
16 Carisbrook Grove, Stamford,
Lincolnshire PE9 2GF.
Tel 01778 590455,
twelvenuns.co.uk
Mail-order nursery run by Hugh Nunn's daughter, Penny Dawson, which sells a range of rhizomes and plants raised on the nursery, including many bred by her father.



T. ludovicianum

Known as the Louisiana trillium, this has strongly marked leaves and erect flowers, which can vary from green through to purple. The wavy-edged petals are set around upright, wide stamens. 30cm. USDA 7a-8b.



T. rivale

This small trillium with red-speckled white flowers loves stream edges, but will need drainage and moisture to do well. Less hardy than some, it's often grown in an alpine situation. 15cm. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.



T. rugelii

Broad, green foliage and a curving stalk that tucks the flower under the foliage typify this robust species. Its distinctive flowers have strongly recurved petals that turn back on themselves. 45cm. USDA 3a-9b.



T. luteum

As its name, yellow wood trillium, suggests, this showy trillium needs shady conditions. Stays in flower for weeks so very garden worthy and colour develops as flowers mature. 30cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 4a-7b.



T. grandiflorum f. roseum

Cool-pink flowers, rather like most montana clematis in colour, held above all-green foliage, which has a red picotee edge due to presence of anthocyanin. Pink forms are locally frequent in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Kentucky, although Hugh Nunn's pink forms originated in Virginia. 45cm. RHS H5.

DIANNA JAZWINSKI / GAP PHOTOS

MANY THANKS TO HUGH NUNN FOR GRANTING US ACCESS TO HIS NURSERY HARVINGTON HELLEBORES (NOW CLOSED) WHERE THE MAJORITY OF THESE IMAGES WERE TAKEN.

JANINA KOSBAK / GAP PHOTOS