

A Primula for Every Border

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This year is officially the year of the rose (genus *Rosa*), but for me it will, as usual, be the year of the primrose (genus *Primula*). I've nothing against roses; they just don't do well in my yard, which has full sun nowhere. Primroses, however, appreciate a bit of shade and I can provide as much or as little as they desire.

Primroses are sweet, endearing little flowers. They bloom primarily in spring, hence the name, derived from the Latin *primus*, meaning first. They are not prim in the sense of prim and proper, being informal, friendly and exuberant in flower. It is always proper to include them in the garden. I consider them essential.

There are about 425 species of primrose. Most are native to a variety of habitats in the moister, cooler areas of the Northern Hemisphere. Given the range of habitats they have adapted to, it only makes sense that some will survive and thrive in our Wisconsin gardens, although most need a wee bit of help. As long as one satisfies the absolute requirement—that their root zone is cool and moist while growing—it is possible to find a primula for any partly sunny to very shady area of the garden. They dislike extremes of temperature, and therefore benefit from a mulch in winter and a carefully chosen location to provide protection from our hot midsummer afternoon sun. They also generally like a humus-rich soil.

Easiest of all the Primulas is *P. sieboldii*. Although it is native to wet meadows in Japan, it grows beautifully here. One Web site even describes it as the only “foolproof” primrose, growing in any soil and exposure. It has the good sense to go dormant in August when most primroses are struggling with the heat and not looking their best.

P. sieboldii comes in a variety of colors—white, shades of pink, lavender, even two-toned with the petals white on one side and pink on the other. Like snowflakes, the petal shapes are all different. They grow easily from seed, demanding no special care to get through the heat of summer. They bloom in their second year, rewarding the gardener with the joy of discovering a unique flower as each plant comes into bloom.

The 425 species of primrose have been divided by botanists into 37 sections and many subsections. *P. sieboldii* is, for example, in Section *Cortusoides* and subsection *Cortusoides*. The value of these classifications to the gardener is that species in the same section usually have similar cultural needs. In this same section and subsection is *P. polyneura*, a species I started from seed, planted out and forgot about until its third year, when it bloomed. It was the star of the garden. Growing in deepish shade, its flowers were a dark pink and very long lasting. The same section but in subsection *Geranioides* is *P. kisoana*, which also does well here in a woody garden. It has big, fuzzy leaves, white or pink flowers, and is easily propagated, as it is rhizomatous (unusual for a primrose).

Most garden writers put the Primulas in broader groups determined by common cultural needs. The above mentioned primulas are woodland primulas (from Asia), growing in similar conditions to the European woodland (edge of woods) primulas. It is this latter group with its ‘gold-laced’ variety and a ‘true blue,’ both grown from Thomson Morgan seed, that led me down the primrose path of enchantment with these plants.

A more demanding group of *Primula* is that referred to as for the bog or waterside, frequently called ‘candelabra’ because of the multiple-tiered flower spikes. Of these, *P. japonica* is most easily grown here. Although short-lived, it self-sows readily, so one need never be without them. Others in this group, *P. bulleyana* and *P. beesiana*, although perennial in their native lands, are only biennial for us. Apparently, one Midwestern summer is their limit. Fortunately, they too will self-sow. Mine died after setting seed, despite my valiant attempts to keep them happy. The following spring seedlings were everywhere—including The PATH! I hadn't the heart to weed them out. This worked out for the best, as the ones that germinated in the lovingly-constructed-specially-for-primroses raised bed, home of the parent plants, all died, and the ones in the PATH flourished. If they come through the winter, I'll have a real primrose path. Attempting to grow this group is, for me true “habitat denial,” as my garden is at the top of a dry, thin-soiled hill with much of the shade provided by large trees (elms), well known for their ability to take all available moisture. These primulas need constantly moist soil, good drainage, a fair amount of light (no deep shade) and are very unforgiving if their root zone becomes hot or dry.

For more specifics on *Primula* culture *Rock Gardening*, by H. Lincoln Foster and *Primroses & Spring*, by Doretta Klaber, offer an excellent introduction. Both are by American gardeners and contain useful insights into growing primroses in the U.S.A. My favorite reference book is *Primula*, by John Richards. It contains detailed cultural information from a British perspective and fascinating descriptions of Primulas in their native lands. You can read about leaf mould pastures high in the Himalayas or *P. florindae*, tall as a person when in flower. All three books are in the Olbrich Library.

—Ruth Cadoret