

SPRING PLANT COMBINATIONS FOR DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

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INTRODUCTION:

Much as we all love the well-known spring wildflowers like trilliums, phlox, bluebells, etc. inhabiting the rich deep loamy soils of cove forests and rich lowlands; I find that in the spring I most look forward to and most interested in the sometimes overlooked spring flowers growing in more difficult situations: poor dry soils, exposed sunny fields hills and ridges, washed out hardpans and other places eschewed by the more delicate.

Here then is a short list of plants worthy of growing and tolerant of terrible situations, deer, and disturbance. A few are familiar and some deserve greater attention and one or two are utterly unknown to gardeners.

Viola sp. (Violets):

This group of plants is too large and diverse and useful for me to pick out just one or two species to talk about. Often regarded as weeds they are none the less wonderful native wildflowers, useful groundcovers, important to spring-flying pollinators and host to a number of Butterfly species including the Regal Fritillary. Inhabiting every possible soil and sun condition they are the universal companion for every plant.

Planting tip: Plant in masses. Because they are small they rarely are in a position to crowd out your other plants.

Favorite species:

Viola canadensis (Canada Violet): Rich woodlands and floodplains.

Viola cucullaria (Marsh violet): Wonderful violet of damp marshy places. Great companion for marsh marigold.

Viola pubescens (Yellow Violet): It's a yellow violet...no other reason needed right? Great for dry woodlands.

Viola sororia (Common Blue Violet): Often the most reviled of the violets for its ability to spread quickly. This however makes it a great low-maintenance groundcover. It comes in a variety of colors and forms a beautiful flowering carpet. Tolerant of a variety of sun and soil conditions.

Viola striata (Cream Violet): Very adaptable groundcover. Dry to moist shady woods and fields.

Anemaria sp. (Pussytoes)

The pussytoe species (*Antennaria*) are, like the violets, a diverse and overlooked group of plants that are often relegated to weed status. But there are few spring plants I enjoy more. On paper they have a lot going for them: They are tough and durable in poor soil, tolerate full sun or deep shade, have attractive grey mat-forming foliage, and have attractive long-lasting flowers that are either male or female and look quite different from one another. They are also important host plants for the Painted Lady Butterfly.

There are two species that are most useful for creating a woodland groundcover or a sunny pussy-toe lawn:

Antennaria neglecta (Field Pussytoes): Grows best in very droughty and poor soils often on ridges, overgrazed fields, or thin stony lawns.

Antennaria plantaginifolia (Plantain Leaved Pussytoes): More often found in dry to moist woodlands on poor well-drained soils.

Companions: *Houstonia caerulea* (Bluets), Violets, *Salvia lyrata* (Lyre Leaved Sage), *Pedicularis Canadensis* (Wood Betony), *Sisyrinchium angustifolium* (Blue Eye Grass), *Fragaria virginica* (Wild Strawberry), *Krigia biflora* (Cynthia), *Castilleja coccinea* (Indian Paintbrush).

Zizia sp. (Alexanders)

The alexanders of which there are two principal species:

Zizia aurea (Golden Alexanders): This is the larger more robust of the two species. It frequents sunny to shady river banks and moist to wet fields.

Zizia aptera (Hear Leaved Golden Alexanders): This is the smaller stockier brother to the above species. It is not uncommon to find the two together in the same habitats, but being smaller, it is less tolerant of taller vegetation and as such can be more often found in poorer, dryer and shadier places where the competition is lessened.

Both of these plants are extremely prolific and form large masses which make them useful as a taller groundcover for difficult or weedy places. They are also important pollinator plants and can attract the Black Swallowtail Butterfly.

Companions: *Senecio aureus* (Golden Alexanders), *Jacobs Ladder* (*Polemonium reptans*), *Wild Geranium* (*Wild Geranium*), *Wood Phlox* (*Phlox divaricatus*), *Marsh Phlox* (*Phlox glaberrima*), *River Oats* (*Chasmanthium latifolium*)

Senecio aureus (Golden Ragwort)

One of the perfect companions for golden alexanders, the golden yellow flowers of this plant actually contrasts subtly with the lemon yellow flowers of the alexanders. This plant, also like the former, is a great all-purpose groundcover. Typically inhabiting moist fields, woodlands and streambanks, it is tolerant of virtually every sun and soil situation barring extremely dry sunny places.

Planting tip: A little goes a long way. Space these out widely as they will quickly knit together to form a uniform groundcover.

Companions: *Zizia aurea/aptera* (Alexanders), *Thalictrum dioicum* (Early Meadowrue), *Anemone canadensis* (Canada Anemone), *Phlox divaricatus* (Wood Phlox), *Hydrophyllum* sp. (Waterleaf), *Mertensia virginica* (Bluebells), Ferns.

Thalictrum dioicum (Early Meadowrue)

One of the poster-children for subtle spring beauty. This is one of my favorite companions for *Senecio*. Its lacy leaves and subtle flowers create a perfect and long lasting textural tapestry for damp woodlands. The leaves easily mask senescent leaves and flower stalks of earlier spring plants. The plant will seed around and form great masses without becoming overwhelming. Like *senecio* and *alexanders*, this plant is usually found in damp woodlands and stream banks but is tolerant of slightly sunnier and drier locations as well.

Planting tip: This plant is dioecious so plant several to ensure a mix of males and females. The male flowers are more attractive while the females are bigger and more prominent.

Companions: *Senecio aureus* (Golden Ragwort), *Zizia aureus* (Golden Alexanders), *Phlox divaricata* (Wood Phlox), *Polygonatum commutatum* (Greater Solomons Seal), Ferns.

Aquilegia canadensis (Eastern Red columbine)

Red is one of the rarest colors in the North-Eastern Flora and while this plant is one of the most familiar of spring bloomers, few know just how tough it can take it. Typically growing in dry stony woodlands, cliffs, and boulder outcrops this plant can seemingly thrive in areas with almost no soil. It also has a tolerance for alkalinity and can sometimes be found growing in decayed mortar on old bridges. Though we typically baby it in our gardens, its tolerances make it perfect for using in the worst of soil conditions.

Companions: *Allium cernuum* (Nodding onion), *Chrysogonum virginianum* (Green and Gold), *Taenidia integerrima* (Yellow Pimpernel), *Silene caroliniana* (Sticky Catchfly), *Phlox pilosa* (Downy Phlox)

Chrysogonum virginianum var. *virginianum* (Green and Gold)

Green and gold is a very useful long-blooming groundcover that occurs typically in dry stony woodlands and outcrops that are often rich in limestone. As such it is a perfect companion for Red Columbine. This is another that is often babied in our gardens sometimes to death. It has a dislike for rich soils and mulchy-leafy surroundings that hold moisture and promote rot. This plant also has at least three sub-species with different habits. Cultivars rarely mention which subspecies it is.

Var *virginianum* is the northern-most variety and the tallest. It does not form stolons and so is clump-forming.

Var *austral* is the southern-most variety, is shorter and stoloniferous. Stolons can be up to two feet long.

Var *brevistolon* occupies the middle range and most closely resembles var *austral* but with short 1-2 inch long stolons.

Companions: *Aquilegia canadensis* (Red Columbine), *Taenidia integerrima* (Yellow Pimpernel), *Allium cernuum* (Nodding onion), *Silene caroliniana* (Stick Catchfly), *Phlox pilosa* (Downy Phlox)

Taenidia integerrima (Yellow Pimpernel)

Virtually unknown to gardeners this is best thought of as the “Zizia of the uplands”. It grows in stony woodlands to sunny ridges and dry fields. In full sun the stems develop a brilliant red coloration. The leaves are ferny like meadow-rue and the flowers are lemon yellow and more diffuse in structure than a Zizia. The plant has a deep taproot which makes it impervious to drought.

Companions: *Aquilegia Canadensis* (Red Columbine), *Allium cernuum* (Nodding onion), *Phlox pilosa* (Downy Phlox), *Scutellaria ovata* (Heart-leaved Skullcap), *Deschampsia* sp. (Hairgrass)

Monarda bradburiana (Eastern Bee Balm)

Eastern Bee Balm is a bit of a misnomer as the heart of its natural range is solidly mid-western. That said it has a couple of qualities that make it a genuine star of the spring garden. First, unlike almost all other bee balms, it actually blooms in the spring. Second, it is short and manageable in a garden. Third, it is tolerant of harsh conditions. Usually in bloom from the end of May through June it is covered in butterflies and bumble bees. It can grow in full sun to part shade and can tolerate virtually any soil condition besides excessive moisture.

Companions: *Aquilegia Canadensis* (Red Columbine), *Oenothera fruticosa* (Sun drops), *Phlox pilosa* (Downy Phlox), *Blephilia ciliata* (Downy Wood Mint)

Thalictrum pubescens (Tall Meadow-Rue)

If you need a plant with some height in the spring (albeit late spring) then tall meadow rue is about it. Like a tremendous cloud floating on lacy leaves and dark stems, this plant has long been one of my favorites. Very adaptable to soil and sun conditions it achieves its greatest size and grandeur when given full sun and moist rich soils.

Companions: Careful consideration is needed here to not overwhelm the soft laciness of this plant. *Tradescantia ohiensis* (Spiderwort) can provide a blue backdrop to this plant which is hard to beat. *Phlox maculata* (Meadow Phlox), *Thermopsis villosa* (Carolina Pea)

Spigellia marilandica (Indian Pink)

Ok my one boisterous and temperamental plant on this list, but I like it so much I cannot ignore it. Almost no one who has ever gardened with this plant has seen it in the wild or has any clue as to its natural habitat. We just tend to give it all around good soil and shade but not too much. In fact it is an inhabitant of southern riparian woodlands and typically grows in slightly acidic, rich but well drained soils with some but not too much shade. Perfect garden plant yes? But it can be difficult to establish. In my experience it must be planted in the spring and nursed through the first year. Fall plantings often fail and summer drought can be hard on it at first. But once established it becomes tough as nails. Wonderful red and yellow flowers at the tail-end of the spring attract hummingbirds and bumble-bees primarily.

Companions: *Heuchera* sp. (Alumroot), *Ceanothus americanus* (NJ. Tea), *Phlox glaberrima* (Marsh Phlox), *Hydrophyllum* (Waterleaf), Ferns.

Hydrophyllum sp. (Waterleaf)

Lastly here is another overlooked group of useful groundcovers that are often relegated to weed status. Granted they are prolific and will form an extensive cover, but like the violets and alexanders and senecio, they are very useful for vegetating difficult areas. They also have an extended season of interest since the young leaves are “watermarked” attractively prior to bloom. Then they have lacy white to blue to purple flowers that are first rate pollinating plants for bumble bees. There are two principal species with slightly differing characteristics.

Hydrophyllum canadense (Canada waterleaf): This is the more aggressive of the two, forming extensive colonies in low woodlands. It has the largest leaves and often the most attractive in leaf. The flowers are often hidden under the leaves. *Hydrophyllum virginianum* (Virginia Waterleaf): Probably the more garden-worthy species this plant is a little better-behaved. The leaves are dissected and can be marked or unmarked. The flowers range from bright white to blue to amethyst purple and are held above the foliage. Very attractive and there is probably room for some selections to be made for better leaf markings and flower color.

Companions: *Mertensia virginica* (Bluebells), *Stylophorum diphyllum* (Wood Poppy), *Phlox divaricata* (Wood phlox), *Senecio aureus* (Golden Ragwort), *Zizia aurea* (Golden Alexanders), *Spigellia marilandica* (Indian Pink), *Phlox glaberrima* (Marsh Phlox).