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February 2008

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early
bloomers

Give your spring garden a jump-start with our
12 favorite early-blooming plants.

by Teresa O'Connor



After a long, dreary winter, who isn't starved for color and fragrance in the garden? Fortunately, many bulbs, perennials, and shrubs burst into bloom early, even in cold climates with snow still on the ground.

From charming cup-shaped blossoms to delicate branches of sweetly scented petals, there are quite a few choices for late-winter and early-spring flowers. Here are 12 early-blooming plants that will add beauty to your garden long before other flowers spring into action.

early-blooming bulbs

Dwarf iris (*Iris reticulata*, Zones 5 to 8): Jewel-toned mini irises bloom in shades of violet, blue, and purple in late winter or early spring, much earlier than their larger counterparts. *Iris danfordiae* comes in contrasting bright yellow. Plant in fall in well-drained soil; grows 3 to 6 inches in full sun to part shade. The tiny flowers look best massed in rock gardens, along streams, or near walkways. Mix with early snow crocuses for splashes of color that expand annually.

Glory of the snow (*Chionodoxa* spp., Zones 3 to 8): These star-shaped blue flowers with white centers often poke up in snow, giving the plant its name. Pink and white varieties are also available. Grow this 3- to 6-inch plant with perky little daffodils like 'Tete-a-Tete' in rock gardens, under trees, or in woodland gardens. Prefers full to part sun, and naturalizes quickly under the right conditions.

Early bloomers like giant snowdrops (*Galanthus elwesii*, left) and glory of the snow (*Chionodoxa forbesii*, above) are cheery signs of spring.





Snowdrop (*Galanthus* spp., Zones 3 to 9, depending on species):

Delicate—not showy—is a good way to describe these waxy white flowers that push up through snow on 4- to 6-inch plants in even the coldest regions. In autumn, plant a group of snowdrops with other early bloomers in rich, well-drained soil. Select part-shade to full-shade locations visible from your house or walkway. Giant snowdrop (*Galanthus elwesii*) has larger flowers and leaves.

Winter aconite (*Eranthis* spp., Zones 4 to 9): Buttercup-shaped yellow blossoms adorn these 3- to 5-inch plants in late winter and early spring. In fall, plant in humus-rich, well-drained soil in sun to part shade. Scatter these cheerful flowers among Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*), forsythia (*Forsythia intermedia*), and other early bloomers.

early-blooming perennials

Heartleaf brunnera (*Brunnera macrophylla*, Zones 3 to 8): Dainty blue flowers reminiscent of forget-me-nots rise above heart-shaped leaves in early spring and bloom for up to a month. This woodland perennial can grow 12 to 18 inches tall and 12 to 24 inches wide with rich, consistently moist soil. Foliage is striking throughout summer and fall; several cultivars have variegated white or silver leaves.

Lenten rose (*Helleborus* spp., Zones 4 to 9): This easy-to-grow perennial has long-lasting, cup-shaped flowers in cream, pink, rose, or maroon, which nod above saw-toothed leaves in late winter and early spring. New cultivars offer large double blooms and upright-facing flowers. The shade-loving plant grows 16 to 20 inches tall in rich, moist, well-drained soil. Plant Lenten roses with ferns and hosta in shady patios or small spaces, where the subtle shades of the flowers can be best appreciated.

Hellebores (*Helleborus orientalis*, left) and heartleaf brunnera (*Brunnera macrophylla* 'Dawson's White', below right) brighten up shady spots in the early-spring garden. white winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*, above) adds a spot of early color to sunny and partly shady areas.





Above left: A pink cultivar of moss phlox (*Phlox subulata* 'Candy Stripe') carpets the early-spring garden with color.

Above right: Purple-flowered lungwort (*Pulmonaria longifolia* 'Bertram Anderson') has variegated foliage and attractive funnel-shaped blooms.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria* spp., Zones 4 to 8): Although this plant was considered a lung-disease remedy in the 16th and 17th centuries, it's appreciated more these days for the funnel-shaped flowers—in magenta, blue, violet, pink, or white—that bloom in early spring. Some flowers change colors as they mature. Foliage comes in green, speckled, silver, or white with green spots or margins. Lungwort grows 10 to 18 inches tall and 2 to 3 feet wide. It prefers partial shade in moist, well-drained, rich soil. Makes an attractive ground cover or specimen plant alongside later-blooming perennials.

Moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*, Zones 3 to 9): This creeping ground cover creates a floral carpet of lavender, blue, pink, red, or white blossoms with needle-like foliage in early and mid-spring. Moss phlox grows 4 to 6 inches tall and is excellent for sunny locations. It's moderately drought tolerant, but prefers moist, well-drained soil. Masses of flowers look lovely cascading over rock walls or along paths.

early-blooming shrubs

February daphne (*Daphne mezereum*, Zones 5 to 7): Despite its name, this delightful shrub with fragrant pinkish-purple petals blooms about a month later in colder climates. Scarlet berries follow in late summer. *Daphne mezereum* var. *album* has white flowers and yellow fruit. Grows 3 to 5 feet tall in sun or part shade. Plant with shorter, later-blooming plants to hide shrub's "naked legs." Keep it in places where kids and pets can't get to it, as its fruits and leaves are highly toxic.



Vernal witch hazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*, Zones 5 to 8): In cold climates, vernal witch hazel is often the earliest shrub to bloom, with fragrant flower clusters in cheerful colors ranging from bright yellow and dull orange to red-orange. Prefers full sun to part shade, and can grow 6 to 10 feet tall by 6 to 8 feet wide. It tolerates a range of soil conditions, but performs best in moist, well-drained soil. Makes a nice screen or specimen shrub.

Spring heath (*Erica carnea*, Zones 5 to 7): Pink, red, or white flowers bloom on this low-growing evergreen shrub in late winter to early spring. Prefers acidic soil in full sun. Spring heath grows 12 inches tall and 24 inches wide, so it's ideal as a ground cover and for rock gardens. Survives colder regions with good winter protection.

Winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*, Zones 6 to 10): The hardiest of the jasmines, this deciduous shrub has bright yellow flowers in late winter and early spring. Typically grown as a 3- to 4-foot-tall sprawling mound with arching branches. When supported, the vine-like shrub can grow 10 to 15 feet. Plant in well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. Looks attractive grown as a vine by a sunny doorway, or as a ground cover, especially when cascading over a retaining wall.

This winter, take a moment to review your own garden. If you see places that could use a splash of early-season color, start planning for next year. With all these wonderful options, it's easy to have lovely and fragrant flowers in your garden much earlier than you might think. 🌱

Teresa O'Connor is a garden writer in Boise, Idaho. She's trained as a master gardener in California and Idaho.



Shrubs with late-winter and early-spring color include vernal witch hazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*, above) and winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*, above right).

See Resource Guide on page 62 for more information.