

My Favorite Garden Plants

by Sheila Morrison

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When someone asks about my favorite plant, my response is, "That depends..." usually on what I am working with or what is blooming at the moment. Right now my favorites are the plants that bloom in April, breaking the monotony of the grays and browns of winter's dormant and dead plants.

At the University of Montana Native Plant Garden, douglasia, Missoula phlox, and cous biscuitroot are among the first to burst forth with their pink, blue, and yellow blossoms.

Douglasia (*Douglasia montana*) blooms first, with flat patches of plants completely covered with bright pink flowers. Before these fade, the huge mats (nearly three feet across) of Missoula phlox (*Phlox kelseyi* var. *missoulensis*) start blooming. These blossoms also completely cover the plant, this time in pale blue. Cous biscuitroot (*Lomatium cous*) then chimes in with splotches of bright yellow flowers and ferny green leaves. Some biscuitroots even come up in the edges of the phlox mats and among the prickly pear pads.

These plants can be grown in the home garden with some care. Their strictest requirement is a gravelly, well-drained soil. A mix of one part each soil, sand, and a small gravel like turkey grit works well. They also need sun most of the day, and slope to drain away excess water. Without attention to these needs, the roots simply rot.

All three plants can be started from seed. Douglasia seeds reportedly can be planted immediately upon ripening and left outdoors for germination the following spring. My experience is with seeds held at room temperature for some weeks after collection. In that case, they need to ripen for a

year at room temperature. Then they require a month of warm, moist treatment, followed by three months cold treatment outdoors. Plants do not develop if they are moved to a very warm space immediately after germination. Interestingly, another primrose family member, the shooting star (*Dodecatheon pulchellum*) won't develop either, if warmed too soon after germination. (A few douglasia plants will be available at the Clark Fork Chapter plant sale on May 20.)

Douglasia seeds sit conveniently on the surface of the plant when blooming is done and are easily gathered. Not so the phlox. Phlox seeds nestle down among the prickly leaves, making them difficult to find and painful to collect. Furthermore, the seeds are dumped into the dense mat of foliage shortly after ripening. So you have to be sharp-eyed, brave, and quick to collect them.

Phlox germination is simpler than douglasia. Seeds germinate over a period of three to four months at 40 degrees and don't mind being warmed soon after germination. A Montana endemic, this plant is rated G2/S2 by the Montana Natural Heritage Program, meaning it is at risk globally because it has been found at fewer than 20 locations, all in Montana, of course. Missoula's Waterworks Hill is one known site. Obviously no plant should be dug in the wild, but a few seeds might be collected if your timing is good.

Cous biscuitroot germinates best planted outdoors in the fall. It then self-sows generously, developing the fat, starchy roots that grizzly bears enjoy. Its leaves die down in early summer, but phlox and douglasia leaves will remain green throughout the summer if watered a little in the driest periods.

While we enjoy these plants as they bring an end to winter, we also know that they are the promise of more color to come all summer.