

Primula-Primrose
Garden Column 1/25/12
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In Latin, *Primula* means “dear little first one” and that definition is decidedly dissimilar to Shakespeare’s reference in *Hamlet* to a “primrose path of dalliance.” But, the primrose, for all intents and purposes here shall be considered a cheerful harbinger of spring: certainly one of the dear little first ones.

There are over 450 species of the genus *Primula* and thousands of hybrids. The genus is divided into five types: *Auricula* (see below), *Candelabra* (tall stemmed, with many whorled flowers), *Acaulis* (hybrids with large rosette flowers), *Polyanthus* (including the Common primrose, Oxlip and Cowslip) and the *Juliana* type. Originating in the Himalayas, the primrose thrives in cooler climates. Their habitats are almost as broad and varied as the genus. *Primula* can be found in bogs, marshlands and up into alpine areas. Although we are most familiar with the Common primrose, I would encourage a visit to the *Auricula* type. Accessing a computer, go to ‘Google Images’ and type in ‘Primula Auricula’. The images on these pages will take your breath away (well, maybe not, but they are lovely—the green petals are my favorite). The *Auriculas* are evergreen and developed from *P. auricula* and *P. hirsuta* with flowers that are mostly flat-faced. The *Auricula* type has three subgroups: Alpine (white or gold centered with contrasting petal color), Show (distinct white in center of flower often surrounded by a black ring) and Garden/Border (often fragrant and vigorous in growth).

Primulas prefer rich humus, slightly acidic (pH 5.5 – 7) soil. They tolerate full sun in cooler months, but need partial shade in summer. Feed during vegetative growth (before flowering). Cut stems back after flowering. Primroses are effective in rock gardens (especially the shorter, sturdier Juliana type) or as border or edging plants. They partner well with rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias or with ferns and hostas. As for pest and disease resistance: susceptible to spidermites and aphids as well as slugs and snails. Copper strips, crushed egg shells or organic slug bait will dissuade the latter two.

A primrose path (not the Shakespearean variety) fronting a grove of rhododendrons would be handsome sight. Try a new species of primrose. Contact your local nursery.

NOTE: Yard and Garden Lectures continue. New Master Gardener class begins in February. Go to county.wsu.edu/Jefferson/gardening for more information.