

Primroses

Primroses, the first flowers of spring were traditionally bound to eggs to make a pattern and the eggs were then hard boiled with onion skins and gorse flowers for dye. Children would, as R.S.R. Fitter narrates 1945, then "go Pasche egging on Easter Monday with bread and butter and a packet of crisps for a picnic." The flowers have also long been used to decorate churches at Easter, to make posies, to pick for market and, in German folklore, they were even said to act as keys to fairyland.

It's just great to see the first delicate yellow buds of the wild primrose, *Primula vulgaris*, down by my burn. It's a real treat when a whole bank is painted yellow. The flowers have ideal conditions there, enjoying the dappled shade of a hazel grove and reliably moist soil.

Most wild primroses thrive in the damper, wetter west. There they will even cope with seemingly dry hedge banks or coastal paths; I remember seeing some growing at the back of a beach on Barra. But, with lower rainfall in the east, primroses will only be found in damp, more shady spots.

It is worth thinking about buying other native primulas, especially cowslips, *Primula veris*, and our tiny little Scottish primrose, *Primula scotica*. This grows wild in the far north, Caithness and Sutherland, but I have to say that its dark purple flowers do look good at the front of a well drained border. Wild primroses can come in almost any colour from pale cream, through every shade of yellow to pink. Many of these populations are under threat from more intensive farming methods, so there's a lot to be said for supporting and enjoying these hardy, wild species in the garden.

Nonetheless, gardeners are also spoilt for choice when selecting from the seemingly endless numbers of cultivated varieties. With over 400 different species and a tendency to hybridise, primulas have been bred to meet almost any colour, shape or growing condition we want. There are varieties to suit bog gardens, borders, containers, alpine houses and greenhouses and, if you want to buy new plants, spring couldn't be a better time to visit the garden centre. They will probably be in flower, so it's worth checking whether the plant you want is a biennial that will die at the end of the season. Even short-lived perennials may only give you another year or two of flowering.

There are three main groups of primula: *auricula*, *candelabra* and *polyanthus*. Auriculas are the more difficult, tender varieties that need a lot of care, attention and protection from frosts. Candelabras, on the other hand, are tough perennials that will do well provided they are grown in a moist shady place. Their ideal location is in a bog garden or at the edge of a burn. They produce circles or whorls of delicate flowers in tiers up long, sturdy stems. The primrose/polyanthus group is probably the most diverse collection, with varieties developed to more varied growing conditions than the candelabra or wild species. The primrose varieties produce one flower per stem, while polyanthus will have several and, confusingly, since varieties hybridise so madly, that strict rule is often broken! But not everyone, myself included, would consider giving garden room to the stridently coloured varieties with their crudely clashing colours. So check out the garden centre to see what you fancy, first making sure that it will thrive where you want to plant it.

The cheaper option is, as ever, to grow from seed, though thinly sowing dust particles is quite a challenge. In late winter or in July, fill a small pot or seed tray with fine compost, dampen and, as thinly as possible, scatter the dust-like seeds on the surface. Then use a mist sprayer to settle the seeds in and keep them moist. Alternatively, you could invite a local ant nest to deal

with the seed from any primulas you already have. Like 3000 other species, primulas use a process called myrmecochory to disperse their seed – at least as far as an ant will travel. Primulas add an elaiosome, an oily fatty substance, to the outer coating of their seeds and the ants use this to feed their larvae. The primula seed is then discarded on the ant midden inside or just outside the nest; all set to germinate.