

Spring ephemerals for the garden

Spring ephemerals are shade plants that emerge and flower in late winter and spring and [then fade away] complete their life cycle early, fading away once trees leaf out and the ground dries up. As they are vulnerable to invasive plants and deer, our yards can create a haven for them and bring us delight as we discover them peeking out from under fallen leaves in early spring. They will be at home in any woody setting on your property, but they also do perfectly well under shrubs or even in a sunny garden bed where the larger perennials will provide shade, so long as their moisture requirements are met. Blooming at a time of year when most of us are not regularly out in our woods or gardens, site these ephemerals where you can enjoy them, tuck them under shrubs along the path between your door and your car.

How to grow: Plant spring ephemerals where they will receive some sun in the late winter (not next to a north-facing building, for example, or under an evergreen plant) but then will be shaded later on. Grow them under leaf litter, which provides the environment needed for them and their pollinators. Fall (or even winter) would be an ideal time to plant them, however they are seldom available then in the trade and you will probably be planting what looks like just a pot of dirt, trusting that the dormant plant is really in there! Planting in spring is fine, although you may not see flowers that first season.

Where to buy spring ephemerals: Most commercial nurseries sell Virginia Bluebells in season, but other spring ephemerals are more likely found at one of the spring [native plant sales](#), one of our [garden centers that specializes in native plants](#), or a native plant [mail order company](#). Ask a friend for a division or a start.

Truly ephemeral

These Northern Virginia natives lose their leaves soon after blooming and are not seen again until the following spring.

Dutchman's Breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*)

Rue anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*)

Star Chickweed (*Stellaria pubera*)

Toadshade Trillium (*Trillium sessile*)

Twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*)

Virginia Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginiana*)

Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*)

Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*)

Not as ephemeral

These plants are often lumped with the ephemerals because they bloom early and briefly, but their leaves remain attractive longer into the summer, especially if they get more moisture.

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)

Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)

Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*)

Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium reptans*)

Round-lobed Hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *obtusata*) The leaves are actually evergreen, but they are so inconspicuous that they are often lumped with the spring ephemerals.

Never take these plants from the wild!

Our goal is to support the ecosystem, not destroy it. If you cannot find certain spring ephemerals for sale, it is because they are difficult or slow to propagate and need very particular conditions. Most likely they will die if you try to transplant them. Lady Slippers are a classic example of that, and very few remain in our natural areas.



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