



LAYERS OF THE GARDEN: EARLY SPRING TREASURES

Table of Contents

Introduction: Nature's Perfect Timing

Stars of the Spring Garden

Creating the Perfect Environment

Designing Stunning Spring Displays

Extending the Spring Display

Next Month Preview

Nature's Perfect Timing

January and February have brought us two of the most important foundational layers of the garden, while March brings us to those special and unique treasures that appear in early spring: spring ephemeral plants.

While not all of the plants featured this month are true ephemerals (plants that disappear completely by midsummer), they all contribute to the garden's temporal layering that defines early spring. Some varieties follow the classic ephemeral pattern (their foliage yellowing and retreating as summer arrives), while others shift roles as the season progresses: blooming when light is abundant, then transitioning to supporting roles, providing textured groundcover as others take the stage.

This mixed approach reflects the reality of designed gardens versus wild woodlands. By combining true ephemerals with plants that bloom early but persist, we extend the spring display while ensuring the garden doesn't leave bare patches as summer arrives. These plants understand spring's unique conditions and capitalize on them, even if their foliage plays a different role later in the season.

Your Year at a Glance

January: Winter Structure

February: Alpine Plants

March: Special Treasures for Early Spring

April: Moss Gardening

May: Edible Flowers

June: Summer Fragrance Plants

July: Weed Control

August: Late Summer Vines

September: Ornamental Seed Heads

October: Late Fireworks

November: Texture, Evergreen Anchors, Preparing the Base Layer (Soil)

December: Conifers

Stars of the Spring Garden

While numerous plants bloom in early spring, true ephemerals are those that complete their entire visible life cycle before summer. Traditional ephemerals include:

- *Trillium grandiflorum* (*Large-flowered Trillium*)
- *Erythronium americanum* (*Trout Lily*)
- *Claytonia virginica* (*Spring Beauty*)
- *Dicentra cucullaria* (*Dutchman's Breeches*)
- *Sanguinaria canadensis* (*Bloodroot*)
- *Jeffersonia diphylla* (*Twinleaf*)

Ultimately, spring ephemerals are critical for early-season pollinators emerging from winter dormancy. Native bees, butterflies, and other insects depend on these early flowers for nectar and pollen when few other food sources exist. Many temporal species have also co-evolved with specific pollinators, creating intricate ecological relationships. Additionally, these plants prevent soil erosion during the vulnerable spring season and provide early-season food for woodland wildlife.

Incredibly important to the local ecosystem, true spring ephemerals can be hard to find. While true ephemerals have a complete lifecycle, native and naturalized perennial favorites will give the effects and benefits of spring ephemerals, without the struggle of sourcing them. These are some of our favorite temporal offerings:

- *Camassia leichtlinii caerulea* (*Great Camas*)
- *Dicentra formosa* 'Luxuriant' (*Pacific Bleeding Heart*)
- *Galium odoratum* (*Sweet Woodruff*)
- *Asarum* (*Wild Ginger*)
- *Oxalis oregana* (*Redwood Sorrel*)
- *Pulmonaria* (*Lungwort*)



Creating the Perfect Environment

Success with spring bloomers begins with understanding and replicating their native habitats. Many of these plants evolved under trees where they receive spring sun but shade throughout the summer, along with rich, moisture-retentive soil enriched by leaf litter decomposition.

Light Requirements

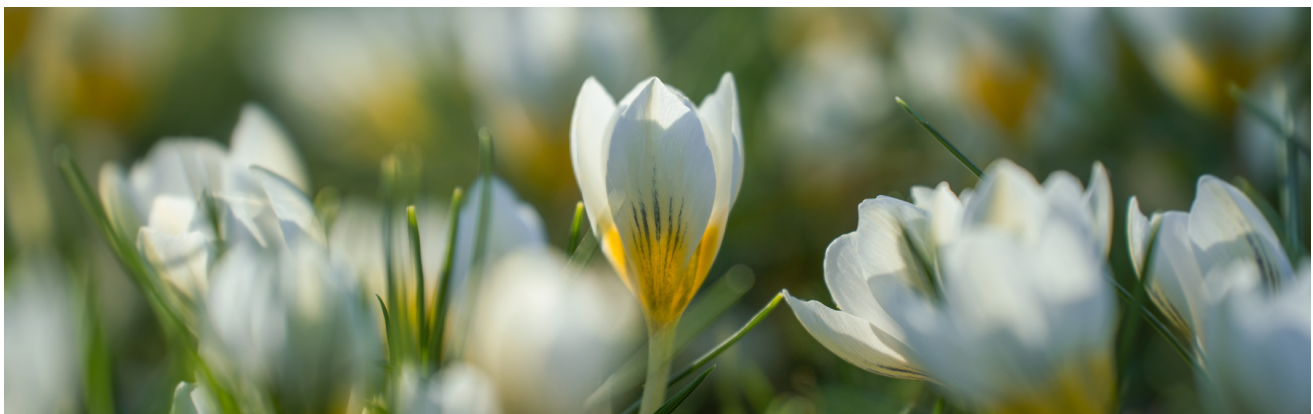
The ideal site receives full sun in early spring before the tree canopy leafs out, then transitions to partial or full shade in summer. This can be achieved under deciduous trees, on the north side of buildings that receive spring sun, or in areas shaded by perennials that emerge later in the season. Avoid planting under evergreen trees or in sites that remain sunny all summer.

Soil Preparation

Rich soil is essential! Before planting, incorporate generous amounts of leaf mold or compost to improve soil structure, moisture retention, and fertility. The soil should drain freely yet remain evenly moist - spring plants evolved in soils that never completely dry out but aren't waterlogged.

Moisture Management

Consistent moisture during the active growth period (late winter through late spring) is critical. Natural rainfall often provides adequate moisture, but supplement during dry springs. Once plants go dormant, they're more drought-tolerant. Avoid disturbing dormant bulbs and roots during summer gardening activities.



Designing Stunning Spring Displays

Designing for spring requires thinking beyond individual plants to consider the evolving landscape. The goal is to create abundant color that gracefully transitions to summer's green tapestry without leaving obvious gaps or bare soil.

Mass Planting

Spring color achieves its greatest impact when planted in generous drifts and colonies. Plant in odd-numbered groups of at least 5-7 specimens, and if space allows, expand to colonies of 20, 50, or more. This mimics how these plants grow in nature and creates the carpet-like effect that makes woodland gardens so enchanting in spring.

Layering Bloom Times

Within the temporal layer, choose species with staggered bloom periods to extend the show. Very early bloomers open while snow may still linger; mid-season species follow; and late spring varieties conclude the display. This succession keeps interest flowing for 8-10 weeks.

Naturalistic Woodland

Plant sweeping drifts of mixed species under deciduous trees, allowing them to self-seed and naturalize. Combine early-season bloomers in overlapping colonies. Add temporal companions that emerge as ephemerals fade.

Formal Shade Garden

Use ephemerals in structured beds with defined edges. Plant single-species groups in geometric patterns or organized drifts. Pair with early bulbs and other temporals for a curated, maintained appearance.

Dry Shade Solution

In challenging dry shade areas, establish ephemerals that can tolerate summer drought once dormant. They complete their growth during spring's moist period, then rest during the dry summer under summer's deep shade.

Extending the Spring Display

Spring ephemerals are not instant gratification plants: newly planted specimens may not bloom for 1-2 years, and seed-grown plants may require even longer. But once settled, these plants are persistent, returning faithfully each spring with minimal care.

Combining true ephemerals with temporal companions creates a garden that evolves gracefully from early spring through summer and fall. The temporal layer provides intense early color, then gracefully exits as later plants take center stage.

While true ephemerals define the early spring garden, many plants bridge the gap between ephemeral and temporal, extending interest into late spring and early summer. These are two of our favorites:

Wild Ginger

Evergreen groundcover with heart-shaped leaves. Hidden purple flowers at ground level in spring. Foliage provides year-round interest and weed suppression.

Height: 6-8".

Solomon's Seal

Arching stems with dangling white bell flowers in late spring. Foliage remains attractive through fall, turning golden yellow. Excellent structural plant for shade.

Height: 18-36".



Next Month Preview

In April, we will descend to the foundational layer - moss. While ephemerals perform a fleeting show above ground, mosses create the garden's living carpet, working year-round to prevent erosion, retain moisture, and add timeless beauty.

We'll explore moss as both an ecological foundation and a design element, examining how this ancient plant group creates texture, softens hardscapes, and provides habitat for countless microscopic organisms.

Moss gardening represents the ultimate low-maintenance layer: once established, these primitive plants thrive with benign neglect, asking nothing while giving texture, color, and ecological function.

