



# Spring Ephemerals for Residential Gardens

In this article learn about the benefits of spring ephemerals and ways to incorporate them into your garden.



Virginia Bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*) Photo credit: Mandy L. Smith

Spring in Pennsylvania brings warm earth, nourishing rain, and a burst of color upon the forest floor. The subtle blooms of native spring ephemerals let us know that cold temperatures will soon be a thing of the past. These flowers blossom before the tree canopy blocks out any bit of sunlight. They have a small margin of time where they must bloom, be pollinated, and set seed. From the stunning and elusive trilliums to the softer spring beauties and delicate frills of foamflower, timing is everything to the survival of these wildflowers of spring.

Blooming times vary for each species, for some it might be a few days, others a couple of weeks. During this time, spring ephemerals provide essential pollen to bees and other winged (or non-winged) invertebrates, and then oftentimes fruit for reptiles (for example, the Eastern box turtle) and mammals. Though fleeting, you will find that the diversity of flowers, colors, and leaf textures will enthrall you to include an ever-growing population of these beauties to your garden.

In this article, you will find a short list of the vast number of spring ephemerals that one can bring into their home garden. I encourage you to do further research on your own. Visit your local nature center or preserve and talk with a naturalist. Search online plant databases through Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Mt. Cuba Center, and even the Missouri Botanical Garden. Of course, you can always begin by getting

out into the woods this spring and discover these wildflowers in their native habitats.

Please note that you should never dig up a wildflower from its natural environment and bring it home! Spring ephemerals are available for purchase; consult the [Pennsylvania Native Plant Society](#) for a list of reputable native plant nurseries.

## Virginia Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*)

Early spring heralds in the delicate pink and white striped blooms of the spring beauty. At times, it is found in small clusters here and there along the forest floor bringing a delightful surprise. Or it can also grow en masse, completely covering the ground and creating a colorful spectacle throughout the woods, and even former forested areas, such as lawns. Many homeowners have learned the benefits of planting spring beauty as an early-season ground cover. Spring beauty is low-growing spring ephemeral, 4 to 6 inches, and fairly adaptable; it tolerates shade and sun, rich moist soil, and even drier soils. Plus, it is one of the longer blooming wildflowers, blooming for up to three weeks. In addition to all of that, it plays an important role as a nectar and pollen source for native bees, so you can't go wrong with adding this petite bloom to your garden.



Spring beauty. Photo credit: Mandy Smith

## Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)

Bloodroot is an awe-inspiring sight in early spring. And you need to be diligent in keeping track of the blooms, as they only last for several days. During this time, a host of insects from bees to flies are drawn to its offerings. Therefore, including bloodroot in your home garden ensures that you can take full advantage of its charm. The 6-inch high flower has many stark white petals that stand out with their deep yellow pistils (which appears heart-shaped) and stamens. A lobed blue-green leaf waits for the flower to complete its cycle creating a unique base. The whole color palette is a deep contrast to the browns of the decomposing leaves. Bloodroot, like spring beauty, makes for an excellent groundcover, also tolerant of various light conditions—though, bloodroot truly thrives in average to moist soils. You may be wondering about the origin of its name, the genus *sanguinaria* stems from the Latin *sanguis*, which means "blood." Bloodroot grows as rhizomes that exude an orange-red sap when wounded.



Bloodroot. Photo credit: Mandy Smith

## Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*)

The white airy racemes of foamflower reach one foot in height and are one of the longest-lasting spring ephemeral flowers. Foamflower can provide continuous blooms from early to mid-spring for up to six weeks. In addition, this ephemeral has stunning heart-shaped foliage that lasts longer than its cohorts—which makes it an excellent groundcover. Plus, it spreads easily and forms dense colonies. *Tiarella* is also adaptable to a variety of soil and light conditions. And it tolerates rabbit and deer browsing. Overall, it's an excellent addition to the home garden.

## Virginia Bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*)

A stunning scene in the spring forest is the flowing drifts of Virginia bluebells that bloom for a few weeks early to mid-season. Showy clusters of pink buds open to pendulous blue flowers. In the garden, bluebells will reseed themselves when conditions are appropriate—moist well-drained soil and part-full shade. It is best to interplant bluebells with perennials, such as hostas or ferns, or annuals, as the foliage dies back by summer. In addition to attracting a diverse number of pollinators, a plus for the Virginia bluebell is that these spring ephemerals are rabbit-resistant and somewhat resistant to deer.

## Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*)

The umbrella-like leaves of mayapple create a miniature forest within your garden that will seem fit for fairy tale creatures. These glossy green leaves make a unique groundcover, which hide delicate white flowers; this spring ephemeral blooms from April through May. The blossoms only form at the axil of a twin-leaved mayapple. Ideal conditions for this spring ephemeral are moist, well-drained soils in part to full shade, which allow it to self-seed. They do tolerate drier soil conditions and short periods of drought, especially when flowering is complete. At that time, a delectable golden-yellow fruit forms that is irresistible to mammals and even the Eastern box turtle. Make sure to pair mayapple with ferns or a late-summer flower, like white wood aster (*Eurybia divaricata*), as it goes dormant in the summer.



Mayapple. Photo credit: Mandy Smith

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