

Primula bulleyana, a candelabra primula

Easy Primulas for the garden

by Martin Blow, SpecialPerennials



The name primula comes from the Latin for “first” and the native Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) is a herald of spring in many woodlands. There are many types of primrose, some common and easy and others rare and requiring special conditions. Thankfully there are plenty of the former to satisfy the average gardener, and enough of the latter to be an absorbing hobby for the enthusiast. This month I’m going to focus on some I’ve found easy enough for most gardens provided you meet the general requirement for a moist soil and some shade from the hot sun.

Primulas can be easily raised from seed but do best from very fresh seed, collected as soon as (or even just before) the seed pods open and sown immediately. If you need to keep seed, then its best in a sealed jar in the fridge. The seed compost must not dry out and a humid atmosphere helps – cover the seed tray with a sheet of glass or a clear plastic bag. In the right conditions seed can germinate in 3 weeks or so.

Once the plants have clumped up it is best to divide them after flowering, or perhaps in early autumn in a cooler spell of weather. Dig up the clump and break it, or if necessary cut it, into individual rosettes. Shorten the leaves by about half to reduce water loss. Some old books recommend dusting the bases of the stems with sulphur powder, or you could dip them in a fungicide solution following the instructions on the pack. I don’t bother with either! Replant or pot up the small plants and keep moist and shaded while there get established.

There are lots of British native Primulas, including the woodland Primrose. The Cowslip (*Primula veris*) is one of the most accommodating, even growing on dry, sunny banks and seedling around to form large colonies naturalised in grass. They are a common sight along roadsides and railway embankments in late spring.



Primula veris—the cowslip seeds to form large colonies on dry banks

Hybrids of these natives gave us the Polyanthas – well-loved bedding plants that are nonetheless perennial flowering every year if divided after flowering. One of my favourite types is the Gold Lace Polyanthus with its yellow centre and gold-edged almost black petals. This type was championed by northern enthusiasts in the late 1800's and remain firm favourites with many petal colours available and underwent a revival of interest in the 1980's.

Some of the most dramatic and easy to grow are the candelabra primulas with their multiple whorls of flowers along upright stems. There are many colours and hybrids to choose from including Bessiana (pink), Bulleyana (orange), pulverulenta (deep pink) and the dramatic Inverewe (burnt orange). These definitely need damp conditions and are traditionally grown next to streams and ponds or in woodland boggy areas. If allowed to seed, they will mix and produce plants in many colours.

Another favourite is the Drumstick Primula (*P. denticulata*) with its short flower stems topped with a ball of flowers in white, blue or pink. These tolerate slightly drier conditions but must not dry out completely if they are to do well.

Auriculas are wonderful plants for the cold greenhouse and there are some that will perform well in the garden as well, but you need to check with the supplier when buying. Auriculas have fleshy leaves and stems and I've found that they want to be moist but not saturated to do well. Apart from the wonderfully coloured and patterned flowers most auriculas are intensely fragrant as well.

The traditional way to display pot-grown auriculas is in an Auricula Theatre. This is an open cabinet of shelves hung from a shady wall or fence where each plant can be shown to full effect. Terracotta pots are best and short split canes are used to hold the flower stems completely upright.

Primulas can be subject to a few pests and by far the most devastating is vine weevil which seems to have a special liking for fleshy roots. If your primulas wilt in the first warm days of spring despite a moist soil, try tugging gently at the plants. If they come out of the soil easily or don't feel firmly planted dig them up and look at the roots. If there's none or very few rootlets around in the soil and look for vine weevil grubs. These are white with a brown head, about ½ inch / 1cm long and have no discernible legs. Get them all out – there could be one or two or lots – and squash them or feed them to your local Robin, just make sure they don't wriggle away. Shorten the leaves on the plant and replant it or pot it up. Apart from that most gardeners will find primulas easy to grow and trouble free.

Happy Gardening, Martin.



Primula beesiana



Primula pulverulenta in dampish shade



A candelabra seedling