

EASTER RISING

Among the most lovely of all spring flowers, pulsatillas have long been cultivated, many making excellent plants for rock gardens, sunny borders or even containers. **Christopher Grey-Wilson**, who is currently revising *Pulsatilla* taxonomy, looks at some of the frequently offered species and selections



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SPRINGING TO LIFE Delightful *Pulsatilla halleri* (above right) is one of several commonly and easily grown pasqueflowers. Its purple blooms emerge before the soft, divided foliage, later developing into feathery fruit-heads (below)

PULSATILLAS, often called pasqueflowers because many bloom around Easter, are closely related to anemones. With their finely dissected foliage and graceful flowers enveloped in a halo of soft hairs, they are highly appealing plants. *Pulsatilla vulgaris* (common pasqueflower) **1** with its eye-catching purple blooms is an increasingly rare and protected UK native found in a scattering of sites on chalky downland and ancient earthworks in southern Britain. It has been an important medicinal herb for hundreds of years and has been cultivated since at least the 17th century.

Pulsatillas in the garden

Apart from their beautiful cupped or star-shaped, ruffled blooms, pulsatillas differ from anemones in one important respect and that is in the fruit-heads in which each fruitlet or achene sports a long feathery tail: after flowering the

fluffy fruits provide an additional attraction in the garden.

Of the 30 or more species, just a handful are commonly grown in gardens. Apart from *P. vulgaris*, closely related European *P. grandis* **2** and *P. halleri* are popular, while some of the Asian species such as *P. albana* **8**, *P. ambigua*, *P. georgica* and *P. turczaninowii* are becoming more widely available.

Those mentioned are not difficult to grow and thrive in any good, well-drained garden soil. While the front of a flower border is excellent for larger kinds, smaller species such as *P. albana* and *P. georgica* are better appreciated in raised beds or containers. All pulsatillas require plenty of sunshine and dislike being hemmed in by other plants, so an open site is ideal. Many nurseries and garden centres stock a range of pulsatillas and making a selection of plants in flower in spring is the best way to buy them for there are some poor selections

on offer at times. It is wise to select strong, young plants: old pot-bound plants will not do well. Avoid moving pulsatillas as they greatly resent disturbance once established and will repay you by sulking or even dying.

Picking the best

Plants grown as *Pulsatilla vulgaris* in gardens are incredibly variable with flowers of differing sizes and shapes, in most colours but yellow and green. Many are probably from a complex hybrid swarm involving *P. grandis* and *P. halleri*. Some garden centres sell named cultivars such as *P. vulgaris* 'Alba' **4**, a selection with white flowers; *P. vulgaris* 'Barton's Pink' **6** with flesh-coloured blooms; and *P. vulgaris* 'Rubra' **5**, its flowers in shades of red. Delightful *P. rubra* 'Eva Constance' **7** with smallish but intense crimson-red flowers is a beauty. In addition, the subspecies of *P. halleri* (especially subsp. *slavica* **9**)



Boxed numbers in the text refer to the following
Pulsatilla:
P. vulgaris **1**
P. grandis **2**
P. 'Papageno' **3**
P. vulgaris 'Alba' **4**
P. vulgaris 'Rubra' **5**
P. vulgaris 'Barton's Pink' **6**
P. rubra 'Eva Constance' **7**
P. albana **8**
P. halleri subsp. *slavica* **9**

With thanks to the Plant Centre at RHS Garden Wisley for help with the photograph. All RHS plant centres stock a range of *Pulsatilla*

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with large mauve or lavender blooms make superb garden plants.

In recent years plants with extra large, open blooms in a full range of colours and with deeply cut 'petals' – almost certainly selections of central European *P. grandis* – have become popular and make imposing plants for the front of a border. They are found under several names, although *P. 'Papageno'* **3** seems the most favoured.

Perhaps the most sought after are those that are sold under the name *P. 'Budapest Blue'*, with large, simple flowers in various soft shades of lavender, lilac-blue and lilac-mauve.

Although all these are easily grown, flowering in their second year from seed and making substantial clumps, few live more than eight or nine years. For longevity *Pulsatilla alpina* is a better bet. Less often seen, it is slower to grow but can live for 20 years or more. No pulsatilla is as bold or handsome,

making clumps 50cm (20in) tall with deeply cupped yellow or white flowers and impressive fruit-heads.

Growing more

Unfortunately, while root cuttings are possible, this is tricky and generally means sacrificing a plant for propagation. The only sure means of increasing stock is from seed, sown the moment it is ripe, or even a little under-ripe (green). Seedlings should be pricked out at first-leaf stage before root systems become entangled. A standard seed compost will suffice. Older seed is less viable and needs a winter chill after sowing before germination will occur. In some gardens, especially in raised beds and rock gardens, plants will self-sow.

Apart from *P. alpina* all make fine plants for deep troughs, sinks and containers, provided they are undisturbed and grown in sun. Liquid feed in summer will keep plants vigorous. They mix well

with smaller daffodils, tulips and fritillarias as well as primroses and cowslips, flowering around the same time.

The only maintenance required is to clip dead leaves from the crown in winter and to give plants a dressing of bone meal in early spring. They are free from problems, but – in my garden at least – pheasants and rabbits nibble emerging flowers in spring. This aside, the charms of these plants are doubtless and they are deserving of space in more of our gardens ■

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i Suppliers Most plants mentioned here are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2009–2010*, but by their former names as their taxonomy is currently being revised. ● See a review of Christopher Grey-Wilson's *The Rock Garden Plant Primer*, Books, p215