

A Heart of Gold

Gardeners are a strange group of folks when it comes to selecting plants. If it is too easy to grow, we often disregard the plant, viewing it as something horticulturally ‘beneath us’. However, if it is too challenging to grow, we complain bitterly and hold the plant in contempt as if it was purposely trying to undermine our horticultural prowess! Many years back, I found myself falling into this pattern of plant snobbery and caught myself belittling some beautiful and easily grown plants. Fortunately, I moved on! One of the original plants that I felt was ‘beneath me’ was a member of the Papaveraceae or Poppy Family – the very easy to grow and attractive group of plants collectively known as Bleeding Heart.

Probably, the most well-known Bleeding Heart is the form native to Siberia, China, Korea and Japan, which was formerly known in the botanical world as *Dicentra spectabilis* (as pictured on the right). Unbeknownst to most – including myself – in August of 2006 the botanical name was officially changed to *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*.

Dicentra is from the Greek *Dis* or twice and *Kentron* meaning spurs. It is an apt description, since each flower has two spurs on the outer petals of the flower. The name was crafted by Johann J. Bernhardt (1774-1850), who served as the Director of the Botanic Garden at Gartenstraße from 1799 until his death. He was noted for his herbarium of 60,000 plants that span the continents of North and South America, Africa and Asia, which now resides in the Missouri Botanic Garden! Interestingly, *Lamprocapnos* is not a new name as one might suspect, since it was first penned in 1850 by Stephan Endlicher (1804-1849), an Austrian botanist and Director of the Botanic Garden of Vienna. It became the acknowledged proper name when molecular testing determined that this species was significantly different than others found in the genus *Dicentra*. *Lamprocapnos* is

from the Greek *Lampros* for shining and *Kapnos* for smoke, referring to how the dissected foliage resembles plumes of shimmering smoke from a distance! *Lamprocapnos spectabilis* was first brought into the gardening spotlight in 1846 by the Scottish botanist and plant explorer Robert Fortune (1812-1880), who collected it on the Island of Chusan off the coast of China. Its popularity spread rapidly and even as early as the 1880’s, it was deemed a popular and



relatively common perennial!

Lamprocapnos spectabilis is a very long lived perennial and thrives best in light shade and humus rich, moisture retentive soils. Mature plants will grow to 24-30" tall and 30-36" across. The individual flowers are typically 1½" long and consist of two heart shaped, pink outer petals and two white inner petals. It resembles the traditional symbol of a heart d'amour (as pictured above), enhanced by a small, heart-shaped white pendant hanging from the base of the flower. With upwards of 18 flowers arranged along an arching 2-3' long flower stem, it is easy to see how this plant grew to become a very popular and commonly used plant during the Victorian period! During late July and August, the plant begins to enter dormancy and the foliage yellows – not a desirable ornamental trait! As such, it is best to position the plant to the back of a plant massing or to simply cut-back the stems and hope the neighboring plants fill-in the resulting hole.

A white flowered selection named 'Alba' is also readily available. It sports a smaller stature, growing to 20" tall and wide with gray-green foliage. However, it too enters dormancy early. In 1997, Hadspen Garden of England introduced a form with golden-yellow foliage named 'Gold Heart' (picture on right).



The foliage certainly brightens a shady location and looks great when paired with dark green foliage plants, such as Hellebore or Mahonia. In summer, the foliage fades to a brighter chartreuse yellow, masking most of the plants transition to dormancy in late summer!

Although the Asian form is undoubtedly the most well renowned Bleeding Heart, there remain a number of other species within the genus *Dicentra* that are ideal garden plants. *Dicentra cucullaria* is the type species for the genus and is a wonderful addition to the shade garden. It is a northeastern North American native that sports small, 1" long white flowers in mid to late March. The flowers resemble a pair of long-johns hanging upside down, which gave rise to the common name of Dutchman's Britches! Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) originally named the plant *Fumaria cucullaria* in 1753. *Fumaria* originate from the Latin *Fum* for smoke, once again a reference to the smoky gray cut-leaf foliage. Although it was



Bernhardi in 1833 who properly renamed the plant, the genus *Fumaria* still exists with approximately 60 species to its credit. A cucullus was a small hood worn by Roman children in chilly weather. Evidently the flowers also resemble this piece of clothing and gave rise to the epithet name! Only reaching 8-12" tall, this spring ephemeral is great for naturalizing into a dry woodland garden (as picture below right at Jenny Jump State Park in Warren County NJ) and, as is true of all Bleeding Hearts, it is deer resistant!

Mention should also be made of two other very garden worthy and easily grown species native to North America: *Dicentra exima* from eastern North America and *Dicentra formosa* from the Pacific coast.

Originally named *Fumaria exima* in 1815 by the English barrister and legal reformer, Charles Henry Bellenden Ker (1785-1871), it was properly named in 1843 by the American botanist and physician, John Torrey (1796-1873). The species epithet *exima* comes from



the Latin *Eximius*, meaning special or remarkable, while *formosa* is from the Latin *Formosus*, meaning beautiful and finely formed. Adrian Hardy Haworth (1767-1833), an English botanist and entomologist originally named the west coast native *Furmaria formosa* in 1800, only to be properly renamed in 1842 by the German botanist Wilhelm Gerhard Walpers (1816-1853). Both these species names aptly describe these two plants that on initial inspection look nearly identical. Both have dissected, gray green, fern-like foliage that grows to 18" tall with clumps that slowly expand to 18-24" wide. Both have heart-shaped flowers, although they are not as dramatic as those of *Lamprocapnos*. Those of *Dicentra exima* range from pink to purplish red, while the slightly larger flowers of *Dicentra formosa* range from yellow and creamy white to pink and purple. One major advantage these two species impart to the Garden is the length of bloom; both flower prodigiously from early May through June, and then sporadically to frost without the foliage going dormant in late summer. Both species have white flowered forms and numerous hybrids are available between the two species.

It is obvious that easily grown plants need not equate to boring or unattractive plants, nor dismissed as something horticulturally "beneath us". Regardless of the repeated changes in the botanical names over the years, Bleeding Hearts remain a garden stalwart, providing a long period of floral interest and asking so little in return. As we contemplate our spring garden to come this winter, consider all the advantages that this group of plants can provide the Garden. For the erudite gardener, it is certainly clear that on a number of levels, these plants truly are the Heart of Gold for your Garden!