



An article by Roger Hammond, holder of the National Collection of Epimediums in Brentwood, Essex..

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Epimediums - Their Culture and some Recommended Varieties.

Epimediums are perennial plants which prefer a moist but well drained soil in partial shade. On our London Clay soil we normally dig in some sharp sand along with plenty of organic matter. For this we use our own garden compost which consists of shredded, woody prunings and herbaceous material, plus grass mowings. It has generally been composting for up to a year before use, by which time it has reduced in volume considerably, but looks so good you almost wish you were a plant! We frequently also dig in some multi-purpose compost, in the belief that it may last longer in the soil than our composted material.

About twenty years ago the number of Epimediums available to gardeners started to increase from around ten. This was down to a few plant collectors finding a considerable number of new and very distinct species in China. These have gradually become available to gardeners, to the point that it is now possible with a computer and credit card to have around fifty delivered to your door. This is quite an expensive undertaking, but no doubt easier and cheaper than going to China and seeking them in the wild! In all honesty, I should admit that some of the fifty or so species are probably only of interest to botanic gardens, National Collection holders and serious enthusiasts, as they have insignificant Chickweed sized flowers. Epimedium enthusiasts, be they amateur or professional nurserymen around the world, have been busy breeding the new species together or with the previously available ones to produce a wealth of new and exciting garden plants. Epimedium are self sterile, so in a garden of mixed species and/or hybrids, the results of seed sowing are going to be new hybrids. Random cross-pollination by insects will no doubt produce some good garden plants. However a few serious plant breeders are doing controlled crosses, with specific aims in mind.

Epimediums are easily propagated by division, which can be carried out in early spring before the new shoots have developed, or in late summer. Potted specimens can be split using a pair of strong hand-forks, perhaps aided with an old knife or secateurs. In the garden two forks back-to-back are usually sufficient for a clump which has already been dug out of the ground.

I will attempt below to present to you a list of a few species and hybrids, some of which may be new to you, which I personally like and would recommend. I have chosen in the most part those which are available to buy from UK mail order companies, or direct from nurseries with a good shade plant section. I regret to say at present you are unlikely to find them at a normal garden centre.

Starting with the shortest and a deciduous species there is *E.*



brevicornu and its form *rotundatum*. This is a plant for a raised bed, rock garden or edging of a woodland bed. When established it will carry clouds of half inch wide, white

flowers, over fresh new leaves.

E. davidii was one of the first of the newer Chinese introductions and we first came across it in the 1990s at the now closed, Washfield Nurseries. It is a

species that is deservedly popular and fairly easy to find. It is a compact plant, which is ideally planted as a group next to the path in a woodland garden. The four



yellow petals form a trumpet with four pointed spurs. This species varies somewhat between clones, some being considerably taller than others.

E. ecalceratum is thought to be a primitive species. In leaf it is similar to *E. davidii*, but carries small pendulous yellow flowers which are



four sided bells, approaching box shaped. It is a plant for the edge of a woodland path or better still a shady raised bed, which will bring the dainty flowers nearer

to eye level. There is an American selection or hybrid of *E. ecalceratum* called *E. 'Lemon Zest'*. It looks exactly like the species but is much more vigorous (see cover picture).

E. stellulatum is available to gardeners as around four different

clones, the most commonly for sale being 'Wudang Star', a plant collected by Roy Lancaster in 1983. The various forms all produce very similar white star like flowers in profusion, held



nicely clear of the foliage. The new foliage has pleasant reddish suffused patches. Other forms offered by nurseries are the straight species and varieties 'Yukiko' and 'Long Leafed Form'.

E. dolichostemon blooms with many pendulous white, *Dodecatheon*,



‘shooting star’ type of flowers. The evergreen foliage is glossy and free of spines around the edges.

E. fargesii, (see cover picture), is a somewhat similar species with flowers that

have slightly narrower petals in white or in the variety ‘Pink Constellation’, a pale pink colour. This was the most admired plant on our show stand at Hyde Hall last spring. I think if we had some for sale they would have sold well. Both the species and its variety have pointed leaves with spiny margins but with the pink variety they are slightly narrower

E. franchettii carries pendulous yellow flowers with four petals that taper into pointed spurs. This type of flower is common to a number of species and is often described as like four legged yellow spiders. The pointed evergreen foliage is often a good pinkish red colour when freshly emerged.

There is a variety of *E. fargesii*, named ‘Brimstone Butterfly’, which has rather larger leaves. When new in the spring they are of a most attractive, pinkie orange colour.



Some authorities are now saying it may belong to another species. Whether or not this is so, it is one of our favourites.

E. myrianthum is more grown as a foliage plant than a flowering one, as individually, its white flowers are small, at about a quarter of an



inch across. In a substantial plant producing several flowering stems the cloud effect of hundreds of small flowers is attractive rather than spectacular. However the

young foliage colour could be described as spectacular. The new leaves are heavily speckled in dark red. There is a variety 'Mottled Madness' I would love to add to our collection.

E. 'Amber Queen' is a hybrid raised by Robin White of Blackthorn Nursery, which sadly no longer trades. For many *Epimedium*

enthusiasts this nursery was the primary source of the newer Chinese species in the UK. 'Amber Queen' as the name would suggest has flowers of an orange hue, but it is the sheer



number of flowers an established plant produces that makes it a plant to seek out. Keith Wiley of Wildside Plants has bred a somewhat similar plant *E. 'Wildside Amber'*.

E. 'Pink Champagne' is a fairly recently released hybrid which was



bred in America by Darrell Probst. Darrell is a keen plant collector, who is responsible for collecting a number of new species of *Epimedium* from China and propagating

them to the point that they could be bought by the gardening public. 'Pink Champagne' has spurred petals which are deep pink at the centre of the flower with lighter pink spurs. Another attractive feature of the plant is the strong maroon red speckling of the young foliage. This is a variety much admired by our visitors.

Again bred by Darrell Probst in the USA is *E.* 'Domino'. The flowers are rosy red towards the centre of the flower but extend into translucent white spurs. It is an incredibly prolific flowerer and this is why it is recommended.

'Domino' is not amongst the most freely available yet, but I think it will be in a year or two. It is a strong growing plant, making a tight clump over 18



inches tall, with the flowers held nicely above the foliage.

E. grandiflorum is a Japanese species which has been known to UK gardeners for more than a century and a half. It is more or less deciduous and the flowers are generally of a good size. The colour varies considerably within wild populations, but now with keen amateur and professional breeders crossing and selecting in many



countries, the colour palette varies from white, through various pink and lilac shades, through reds to violet and purple. Some varieties have two colours with for example, pink sepals and white

petals. There are yellow flowered forms, some of which are said to be a separate species, *E. koreanum*. There are now hundreds of named forms and it will be impossible with a National Collection in an average garden to collect them all. Our intention is to collect a representative number of distinct and garden worthy varieties. One bred by Keith

Wiley, 'Buckland Spider', has become popular for good reasons, as it is vigorous and floriferous. Our favourite plant of all of our 2014 new plants to flower was *Epimedium grandiflorum*



'Akagiza Kura'. We can't say as yet how good it will be for us as a garden plant, but we love the flower colours.