

***Erythronium*—Woodland Bulbs Extraordinaire** by Todd Boland, Research Horticulturist, MUNBG



Erythronium 'Pagoda'

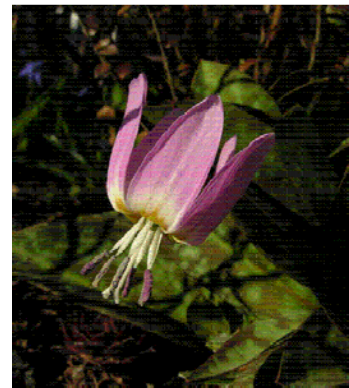
Perhaps the most elegant of the spring-flowering bulbs are the *Erythronium*, often more commonly known as the trout lily, fawn lily, and glacier lily or dog's-tooth violet. The flowers are nodding, with reflexed petals, looking decidedly like Turk's-cap lilies. The flowers may be solitary or several per stem, varying in height from a few centimeters to about 40cm. Floral colours vary from white to yellow and pink shades. The leaves are smooth, broad or narrow and held close to the ground and they may be solitary or produced in a cluster. Many are attractively mottled with maroon spots and blotches. Most are hardy to zone 3, so hardiness in Newfoundland is not a problem.

These lily relatives hail primarily from North America with just a single species being found in Europe and two species in Asia. The name comes from *erythros*, Latin for red, referring to the reddish-pink flower colour of the European species, *E. dens-canis*. In this example, the species epithet *dens-canis* means dog-tooth, referring to the shape of the bulb. The North American common names (trout or fawn lily) refer to the mottled foliage of many of the species. Glacier lily refers primarily to the high alpine

species that bloom just as the snows melt.

Worldwide, there are some 20 species of *Erythronium*, although as garden ornamentals, we only grow a few. All are spring-blooming bulbs that often start to bloom shortly after the snow melts, especially those which hail from high mountainous areas and they will bloom from late April to early June. In the wild, they either grow in lightly shaded woodland areas or among sunny, alpine meadows. Most prefer even moisture year-round but a few of the high alpine species, such as *E. grandiflorum*, *E. helenae* and *E. hendersonii*, require perfect drainage and drier conditions

during the dormant season. As it happens, these species are among the most difficult to grow in cultivation due to their exacting requirements.



E. dens-canis

The bulbs of all the species are distinctly tooth-like in shape. They lack the protective skin found on tulips, daffodils and most of the other fall planted-spring blooming bulbs. As a result, the bulbs of *Erythronium* cannot hold moisture for long once out of the ground. When they are purchased they should be planted immediately. A few are offered in local nurseries but most are available only at specialist bulb nurseries. For the adventurous, they may be grown from seeds sown in fall, but be patient as it may take five years or more for them to reach blooming-size.

The European species, *E. dens-canis* has attractive mottled foliage and solitary flowers in various shades of pink. It is one of the earliest-blooming species and also among the shortest. We have some of these planted in the Rhododendron dell, a donation from FOG member, Bodil Larsen.



E. americanum

One of the easiest American species is *E. americanum*. This is also a small species with solitary flowers, in this case bright yellow with various brown spots. The foliage is perhaps the most striking of all the *Erythronium*. This species produces underground stolons,

which result in new plants popping up some distance away from the parent bulb. We grow a large patch of these in our woodland garden.



E. 'Pagoda

Largest and most prolific of the hybrids are those derived from *E. tuolumnense* and *E. revolutum*, both which hail from the mountains of California. These hybrids may reach to 30-40cm, with 3-5 flowers per stem and relatively large basal leaves which are variously mottled. The most popular and vigorous hybrid is probably 'Pagoda' with pale sulfur-yellow flowers. 'Citronella' has smaller blooms of bright lemon-yellow. 'Pink Beauty' and 'White Beauty' are pink and white-flowered respectively. We grow 'Pagoda' and 'White Beauty' in the woodland garden and Rhododendron dell.

Other species which may be offered in the trade include *E. albidum*, an eastern North American species with solitary, white flowers and mottled leaves. From western North America come the difficult alpine species *E. grandiflorum*, *E. helenae*, *E. montanum* and *E. hendersonii*. Western species that are more amenable to cultivation include *E. oregonum* (1-3 white flowers, mottled foliage), *E. californicum* (1-3 cream white flowers, mottled foliage), *E. howellii* (nearly identical to *E. californicum*), *E. citrinum* (essentially a yellow-flowered *E. californicum*) and the parents of the hybrids, *E. tuolumnense* (solitary yellow flowers,

plain green foliage) and *E. revolutum* (1-3 pink flowers, mottled foliage).



E. 'White Beauty'

To round out the list there are two Asian species of note. *Erythronium japonicum* has solitary lilac-purple flowers with darker interior markings and striking mottled foliage. Some gardeners consider this species to be the most beautiful of all the *Erythronium*. Finally there is *E. sibiricum*, a plain-foliaged species whose relatively large solitary flowers are pink with a contrasting cream-white center.

Drop by the Garden throughout May to see the elegant beauty of these not-so-well known bulbs!