

PRIMROSE SELECTIONS FOR NEWFOUNDLAND

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Primroses are classified into 37 groups based on area of origin, flower form and leaf form. Only a few groups are commonly grown in Newfoundland and Labrador. Below are those popular groups we grow at the Botanical Garden.

Polyanthus Group

The most popular group of primroses are those referred to as polyanthus primroses. These plants produce a much needed splash of colour in May and June. Polyanthus primroses are usually hybrids derived from *Primula vulgaris*, *P. veris*, *P. elatior* and *P. acaulis*. These primrose species are all native to Europe. They are available in a rainbow of colours, including green and brown! They may have single, semi-double or double-flowered forms.

Polyanthus primroses do best in a highly fertile, humus-rich soil and in lightly shaded areas, as in open northern or eastern exposures. Because they do not like acidic soil, lime should be applied to the planting area.

These plants also demand constant moisture. Allowing them to become wilted will severely set back the plants. To help maintain soil moisture, mulch the plants with 3 - 5 cm of old compost/leaf mould or well decomposed manure. This mulch will also keep the organic content high in the growing area. For best results, divide and replant polyanthus primroses into fresh soil every 3 - 4 years.



A mixed planting of Polyanthus primrose.

Auricula Primroses

Another popular and easily obtained group of primrose are the auricula. Like the polyanthus group, they too are natives of Europe. The most popular auricula are hybrids, and as with the polyanthus types, are available in a wide range of colour, again including green and brown. Unlike the tufted leaves of the polyanthus primroses, auriculas produce a rosette of leaves from a stout rhizome.

Auriculas demand more sun than the polyanthus types, and are ideal subjects for a rock garden. While the hybrid auricula are relatively large, species such as *P. marginata*, *P. hirsuta* and *P. pedemontana*, are fairly small in size. Most of the species in this group hail from limestone regions; thus the addition of lime in the growing area is beneficial.



Primula 'Rowena' (left) is a hybrid auricula primrose while on the right is *Primula marginata*.

Even though the auriculas are among the most drought-tolerant of all primroses, they still prefer a moist, well-drained soil. Old leaves often remain at the base of the rosettes and should be carefully removed to keep diseases to a minimum. They flower about the same time as the polyanthus primroses (May and June).

Candelabra Primroses

Another diverse and increasingly popular group of primroses are the candelabra primroses. As the name implies, plants produce whorls of bloom on tall slender stems. A good plant may produce 4 - 6 whorls, each whorl lasting about a week. As such, they are among the longest blooming primrose. This group has the added bonus of mid-summer blooms, generally from late June to early-August. Flowers are available in red, purple, orange, yellow and white.



A collection of different candelabra primroses.

Plants may be grown in full sun or light shade, but flower colours will be richer if plants are lightly shaded. The candelabra primroses include the species *P. bulleyana*, *P. japonica* and *P. pulverulenta* as well as hybrids of these. In the wilds of eastern Asia, these primroses often grow in boggy situations, hence constant moisture is a must. These primroses overwinter as a tight acorn-sized bud.

Sikkimensis Primroses

The sikkimensis group of primroses are valued for their attractive, heavily farinose (powdery), fragrant, pendent flowers that are available in shades of violet, cream, yellow, pink, copper and red. Easily grown in damp, fertile soil in sun or light shade, these primroses bloom about the same time as the candelabra and as such, are great companions for each other. Species in this group *P. alpicola*, *P. florindae* and *P. sikkimensis* are also native to Asia. Although they are rarely available locally, they may be available through mail order catalogues. As a note of interest, *P. florindae* is among the tallest of any primrose, often reaching over 1 meter in height. These primroses disappear completely in winter.



Primula florindae is one the latest flowering primroses.

Additional Primroses

The drumstick primrose, *P. denticulata*, is native to the Himalayas. As the name implies, flowers are carried in dense, spherical heads. They are among the earliest primroses to flower in spring. They are also among the most robust primroses, producing quite large leaves by mid-summer. As a result, they require quite a lot of space in the garden. The colour range of drumstick primroses are more restricted than the polyanthus or auricula, being available in shades of mauve, pink, magenta and white. Like the candelabra types, this primrose also overwinters as an acorn-sized bud.



Primula denticulata selections.

Some plant catalogues will offer *P. sieboldii*. This oriental primrose requires similar conditions as the polyanthus types. They grow best in light shade and demand constant moisture. The leaves of *P. sieboldii* die completely in winter. Plants are slow to sprout in the spring, so carefully mark the area so you do not accidentally dig up the plants. Generally, flowers are only available in shades of pink or white, but what they lack in colour variety, they make up for in flower size. Well-grown plants may produce 5 cm diameter flowers. This species blooms after the polyanthus types, from late June to late July.



Primula sieboldii
'Geisha Girl'

The last locally-available primrose to be discussed is the exotic (if not bizarre) *P. vialii*. This species hardly looks like a primrose at all. The leaves are narrow and held quite upright. In August or even September, plants produce a tall stem topped with a poker-like spike of flowers. The flowers have a red calyx which protects the developing blossoms, and the petals themselves are lavender-blue. Together, the calyx and petals create a pleasing effect. *Primula vialii* is the latest primrose to sprout in spring, often not showing themselves until mid-June. They are not the easiest of primroses for the home gardener to grow and even if you are able to keep them alive through their first winter (they are notorious for rotting in winter), plants are apt to be short-lived. However, they are still a welcome addition to the variety of primroses which can be grown in Newfoundland.



Primula vialii, perhaps the most unusual primrose.

Primroses in the Garden

Many people regard primroses as a typical "spring" flower. However, with the greater diversity of these plants becoming more available, primroses can be an attractive feature of any garden from late April through to late August.

The polyanthus, auricula and drumstick primroses are useful additions to the perennial border. Due to their small stature, they are best placed in the front of the border. They combine particularly well with spring bulbs and other early flowering perennials such as lungwort, rockcress and leopard's-bane. It is useful to interplant these primroses with annuals to provide summer colour.

The best primroses for a rock garden are the auricula. They benefit from the additional drainage afforded by most rock gardens and the plants themselves do originate from alpine environments. If your rock garden is large, then drumstick primrose may also be grown, but remember that these primrose become quite leafy in summer.

The remainder of the previously described primroses are all best suited to a woodland setting. The beauty of the sikkimensis or candelabra primroses is stifled when grown in a perennial border. In a lightly shaded woodland bed, these primroses combine attractively with shooting star, hosta, astilbe, columbine and ferns. If your garden includes a water feature, such an area brings out the natural beauty of the candelabra and sikkimensis primroses.



Many choice alpine primroses are grown in the alpine house of the Memorial University Botanical Garden. On the left is *Primula hirsuta* 'Belluensis' while on the right is an auricula primrose called 'Dale's Red'.