

A Midas Glow for Spring

It is a shame that bulbs, technically called geophytes, totally lack sex appeal during autumn! The seemingly lifeless array of tubers, corms and bulbs that line the shelves of local garden centers are simply begging to be purchased. If only they showed some sign of life or color, early spring would be far more awash with sweeps of yellow, white or purple flowers. One of my favorite geophytes is the genus *Eranthis* or Winter Aconite; a shriveled and lifeless appearing tuber in autumn, it bursts into an effervescent field of gold come spring!

Eranthis is a member of the Ranunculaceae or Buttercup Family, with 8 species collectively spanning the region from S. Europe east to Japan. *Eranthis hyemalis* is probably the most popular species. Native to Southern European, it was initially described by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in 1753 as *Helleborus hyemalis*. *Helleborus* is yet another member of Ranunculaceae with a very similar floral structure, which is what misled Linnaeus. It was not until 1807 that the British botanist Richard Anthony Salisbury (1761-1829) properly authored the plant. *Eranthis* comes from the Greek *er* meaning spring and *anthis* for flower, while the species epithet comes from the Latin *hyems* for winter; clearly, the name solutes its season to flower! The common name of Winter Aconite is a reference to the bloom time and the similarity of the foliage to the genus *Aconitum*.

Eranthis hyemalis certainly is a true harbinger of spring, with the first blooms appearing while remnants of snow still remain scattered throughout the Garden. The 1½” flowers are golden yellow and cup shaped, perched atop a ring of finely divided, dark green foliage (see photo on the right).



Leading Linnaeus astray, the flowers are strikingly similar to Hellebores. The 6 golden petals are actually sepals or modified leaves, while the petals are transformed into nectaries that are laden

with a sugary liquid – the exact same structure as in Hellebores! The nectaries have proven their effectiveness, attracting a vast number of early spring pollinators. Unlike the Hellebores, flowers close during the overnight hours, protecting the flower from frosts or snow. The subtending leaves initially encase and protect the flower bud as it arises through the soil, before unfurling to

act as a floral base. After flowering, the leaves expand rapidly to produce a 3-4" whirl of foliage (as seen on the right with seed capsules). The foliage normally persists into the third week of May, before starting to yellow and enter dormancy. While in flower, the plants are generally 3-4" tall, but as they evolve into a leafy carpet, they stretch to 6-8" in height.



Another easily purchased species is *Eranthis cilicica*. Native to Turkey, the species name is a reference to the ancient region of SE Asia that was famous for Cilice, the haircloth made from Cilician Goats! This species is relatively similar to that above, with just a few minor differences. Most noticeably, the foliage is much more finely divided and the stem is a dark purple, rather than



green. The flowers are also slightly larger, appearing one to two weeks after *Eranthis hyemalis* and effectively extending the duration of the Midas carpet. In the flowers pictured at left, the circular openings to the nectaries are evident in both the flowers.

Eranthis is an easily grown plant, but it is not without a few quirky cultural needs. This geophyte endures the heat of summer and cold of winter as a tuber. A tuber is a modified stem, which stores starches and nutrients. It truly resembles a desiccated raisin when purchased in autumn. The tubers should be soaked for 6-24 hours prior to planting in order to ensure that the slumbering tuber rehydrates and returns to life. Plant the tubers approximately 1½" deep in clusters of

5-6 per hole, which will ensure that several of the tubers will survive and grow. Plants can also be very successfully dug, divided and moved just after they become dormant in late May.

Eranthis appreciates humus rich or silty soils that drain well, yet retain more moisture than most geophytes request. Preferring woodland regions, *Eranthis* will also thrive in sun-drenched areas. Over a period of 50 years, I have seen it naturalize beautifully throughout a garden, even into areas of turf. I should also mention, it is highly deer resistant!

Totally lacking in autumn sex appeal, *Eranthis* needs to be on your list for planting this autumn – a pollinator friendly Midas glow will await you for a lifetime of springs to come!

