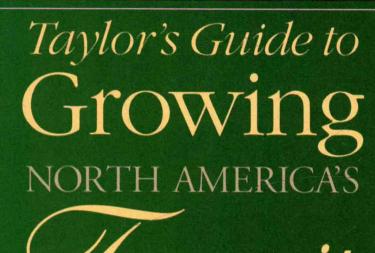
Growing North America's

Favorite Plants

A detailed how-to-grow guide to selecting, planting, and caring for the best classic plants

BARBARA W. ELLIS



Favorite Plants

PROVEN PERENNIALS, ANNUALS, FLOWERING TREES, SHRUBS, & VINES FOR EVERY GARDEN

Barbara W. Ellis

A Frances Tenenbaum Book
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Taylor's Guide to Growing NORTH AMERICA'S

Favorite Plants







o my mother, Jane Ann Ellis, who started me digging in the dirt and gave me my first garden.

To my husband, Peter Evans, with thanks for his support and encouragement during all the long days and lost weekends it took to write this book.

And finally, to my nieces and nephew, who I hope will become the next generation of Ellis-family gardeners: Stephanie Liston, Diana Ellis, Jennifer Liston, and Daniel Hanson.

Special thanks to my editor, Frances Tenenbaum, and to Nancy J. Ondra and Nancy J. Stabile for their enthusiasm, sharp eyes, and helpful suggestions. And thanks to Deborah Fillion for her inspired design.

That are North America's favorite plants?









In the months that this book has consumed my attention, I've had ample opportunity to ponder the question of what makes a plant worthy of being called one of North America's favorites. There are some obvious choices - marigolds and impatiens, for example, as evidenced by the sidewalk sales that pop up at shopping centers everywhere in spring. But I didn't want simply to equate "favorite" with "most commonly planted." Instead, I wanted a book filled with information on proven, versatile plants that experienced gardeners swear by, whether they're valued for their showy flowers, long bloom season, handsome foliage, adaptability, ease of culture, or all of the above. You'll find all the favorites here—including irises, chrysanthemums, daylilies, dogwoods, peonies, and roses — plus a host of less well known plants that are well worth getting to know.

Because garden sites, styles, and taste vary so widely, ultimately each gardener needs to make up his or her own list of favorites. Not every plant in this book is suited to every site—or to every gardener. For this reason, I've tried to include as many plants as possible, from adaptable, easy-to-grow species to plants that need careful site selection and extra coddling to look their best. There are also suggestions for a wide range of plants for tough sites, from dry, sunny slopes to sopping wet spots. As you experiment with the plants in this book in your own garden, I hope you'll discover lots of new favorites.

I don't have just one list of favorite plants: my choices vary tremendously. They not only change from season to season and site to site, they also vary as I evaluate different attributes such as flowers, fragrance, foliage, or fruit. Seasonal favorites spring to mind first, and these include plants on nearly every gardener's list. I cherish the daffodils and tulips of spring, and adore the peonies, bearded irises, and astilbes that fill beds and borders in late spring and early summer. To some extent, though, these plants are out of sight and out of mind by summer, although iris and peony foliage provides an attractive foil for summer-blooming perennials. Ask me about favorite plants then, and daylilies, lilies, coneflowers, roses, and sunflowers are on my list. By fall, it's asters, chrysanthemums, and ornamental grasses.

Most of my favorite plants feature more than just showy flowers. Hellebores bear subtle rather

than showy blooms, for example, but they come in late winter to early spring at a time when flowers are at a premium in the garden. Add to that their glossy, evergreen foliage that stays handsome all year—plus the fact that hellebores are very easy to grow—and you have a perennial I simply wouldn't want to be without. And what would I do without hostas in my shade gardens? Their flowers are a summer bonus, but their striking leaves are the backbone of the garden.

So, when selecting plants for my garden—and as I did for this book—I look at the flowers but also take into account a variety of other factors. When a plant blooms is one consideration, because flowers either unusually early or late in the season are especially valuable. Length of bloom is another: plants that flower for 8 weeks or more really pull their own weight in the garden. Fragrance—of either flowers or foliage—is another plus. Handsome foliage, attractive habit, and other ornamental attributes such as showy fruit, fall color, or interesting seed heads are also high on my list. In addition, I value plants that are long lived and reliable and look their best with minimal care.

I also have favorite plants for particular sites—diminutive thymes, ground-hugging sedums, and tiny hens-and-chicks (*Sempervivum* spp.) for hot, dry spots at the tops of walls, along pathways, and between steppingstones, for example. Hostas, heucheras, and lungworts (*Pulmonaria* spp.) for shade. Other sites yield other favorite plants.

Sentiment is another reason to add plants to a list of favorites. My mother's shady garden is filled with spring bulbs and woodland wildflowers, which you'll find in my garden today. Plants such as daffodils and Virginia bluebells (Mertensia virginica) not only harken back to the garden of my childhood, they symbolize my earliest concept of what a garden is. My early exposure to her woodland garden also fostered a deep interest in native plants, natural areas, and wildlife of all kinds, all of which influence the plants I choose to grow. I likewise value plants that have special meaning - hostas from a friend's garden in Washington, D.C., along with plants I brought from our first house in Virginia to our property here in Pennsylvania, for example. Each spring, peonies that once grew in my great-great-aunt Hattie's garden in Columbus, Ohio, and in my great-grandmother's in Newark, Ohio, flower in my own. Growing plants that remind us of where we came from, or of people who are important to us, adds a whole new layer of meaning to a garden.

How to Use This Book

The entries in this book are arranged in alphabetical order by botanical name. (If you are unfamiliar with botanical names, see "A Word on Nomenclature" below for an explanation of how they work.) The common name of the plant appears in large type at the beginning of each entry. To make it easy for you to acquaint yourself with new and unfamiliar plants, each entry features a pronunciation for the genus name (and species name, if applicable) along with a list summarizing bloom time, the sun or shade exposure that is required, and hardiness. Each entry starts off with a general description of the genus followed by suggestions for selecting plants. Selection criteria vary: In some cases I've organized the species by when they bloom; in others, by what types of sites they grow in. In heavily hybridized genera, such as peonies (Paeonia spp.) and daylilies (Hemerocallis spp.), I've included guidelines that will help you select from among the hundreds of cultivars currently available.

The "Site and Soil," "Planting," and "Care Through the Season" sections in each entry are designed to answer the questions gardeners always ask about a new plant. Where and when do I plant it? Will it bloom in shade? Survive drought? Do I cut it down at the end of the season? When and how do I divide it? Can I grow it from seeds? "Landscape Uses" includes suggestions for plants that make good planting partners and ideas for how and where to use the plants in the genus.

Don't overlook the general entries—Annuals & Biennials, Bulbs, Ferns, Ground Covers, Herbs, Ornamental Grasses, Perennials, Shrubs, Vines, and Wildflowers. These feature detailed information about how to select and grow plants in that group. They also include mini-encyclopedias of even more plants and how to grow them.

If you can't find a particular plant on the contents page, don't forget to use the index. All the plants listed in the general entries and anywhere else in the book are listed there by both botanical and common name. At the end of the book, you'll find a Techniques Glossary with instructions on essentials such as propagation methods, planting, and soil preparation. The Problems & Solutions Guide lists some common problems you may encounter and provides safe, organic solutions.

A Word on Nomenclature. Although botanical names may be intimidating at first, it's worth the effort to become familiar with them. While a



plant's botanical (sometimes called Latin) name refers to only that one plant, common names are notorious for being used to refer to more than one plant. In all the better garden centers and nurseries, you'll find botanical names on plant tags and signs, and if you use them, you have the best chance of getting exactly what you want. (Plants sometimes do get misidentified and labels do get switched!)

A plant's botanical name consists of the name of the genus it belongs to along with its species name, or specific epithet; its species is both words together. For example, *Echinacea purpurea* is the botanical name for purple coneflower, with *Echinacea* indicating the genus; *purpurea*, the specific epithet. *Echinacea purpurea* is the species. The genus name with the abbreviation "spp." (as in *Echinacea* spp.) is a reference to all the species

belonging to that genus. Botanical names are always typeset in italics, although in many cases the botanical name also serves as the common one—hostas are *Hosta* species, for instance. After the first mention in a given section of text, the genus name is abbreviated: *H. venusta* or *E. purpurea*.

The word "cultivar" (short for "cultivated variety") refers to a hybrid or specially selected form of a species developed by gardeners. (Many gardeners use the words "cultivar" and "variety" interchangeably, but botanists recognize a difference: true varieties are variants that were found first in nature, while cultivars are of garden origin. For example, Dicentra formosa var. alba is a white-flowered variety of western bleeding heart.) Cultivar names are set off by single quotes. Echinacea purpurea 'Magnus' is an outstanding cultivar of purple coneflower with 7-inch-wide flowers. In many cases, the species name of a plant is dropped and the cultivar name is used with just the genus name. Often this is because the plant is the result of crosses between several species, and it's not clear what species it belongs to. Many hostas are listed this way-Hosta 'Kabitan' and H. 'Paul's Glory', for instance. Daylilies, peonies, roses, and many other popular plants are treated this way.

In order to keep us all on our toes, botanists reclassify plants with some regularity. As a result, plants can be found in books and catalogs under different botanical names. For this reason, I've included former names wherever I think they may be helpful.

Steps to Good Gardening

While much of a gardener's time is spent focused on caring for individual plants, there are a few fundamental principles experienced gardeners rely on, beyond knowing when to cut back a plant or how and when to divide it. They're the secret to successful plantings that look their best, while requiring a minimum of care. Keep them in mind, and you're well on your way to a thriving, glorious garden.

Get to know your soil. Take a trowel out and dig a few test holes. Learn where wet or dry spots are located and which sites have rich or poor soil. Decide what steps you need to take to improve your soil and what plants are suited to the conditions as they exist now.

Study sun and shade patterns. Watch the sun as it travels over your property during the course of the day. Note which spots are in full sun—at least 6 hours per day; 8 is better—and which are shaded for part or all of the day. (Keep in mind that sun and shade patterns vary throughout the

year as the sun's position in the sky changes; you may want to take a day to observe sun and shade patterns in spring, midsummer, and fall.) Watch for spots that receive dappled shade or constant shade but good light all day long. Many plants also benefit from a site that receives morning sun and afternoon shade. Plan your garden and select the plants you grow according to the patterns of sun and shade you discover.

Match plants to the site. Use your observations of soil types and sun/shade patterns to help you decide which plants to grow. For best results, fill a site with plants that all thrive in the same or similar conditions. Delphiniums and yarrow (*Achillea* spp.), for instance, may look pretty together, but that doesn't mean the plants will be happy growing side by side. One wants rich, evenly moist soil; the other, dry and well-drained conditions. You're much more likely to have a successful, thriving garden if it is filled with plants that are all happy in the same soil and exposure. For more on matching plants to site, see the Perennials entry on page 222.

Care for your soil. Good soil makes a great garden. Get in the habit of adding organic matter to your soil and keeping the soil covered with a protective layer of mulch. In addition, avoid walking on the soil to keep from compacting it, which makes it difficult for water to drain through and for roots to penetrate. See "Soil Building" on page 224 in the Perennials entry for more specific suggestions.

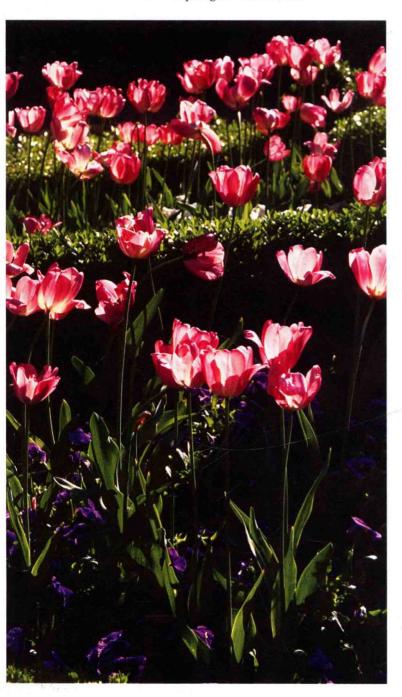
Take time to look at your garden. Make a habit of walking through your garden every other day or so to observe the plants and to look for potential problems. Poke a finger in the soil to see if it is dry. Look under leaves and on stem tips to scout out evidence of developing pest populations. Watch for signs that a particular plant needs to be staked or is ready to be cut back. Keep an eye out for great new plant combinations that have popped up or bedmates that need to be separated at the earliest possible opportunity. Regular scouting trips also will keep you abreast of whatever care your garden requires to look its best.

Don't be afraid to experiment. Push the limits: Try a plant in a site where you've never grown it before. Plant something you've never grown. Buy two plants or divide one large clump, put them in different sites, and see where they do best. Combine perennials you've never grown together. While some of your experiments won't work, many will, and most problems can be easily corrected with a spade. The process of experimenting will make you a better gardener.

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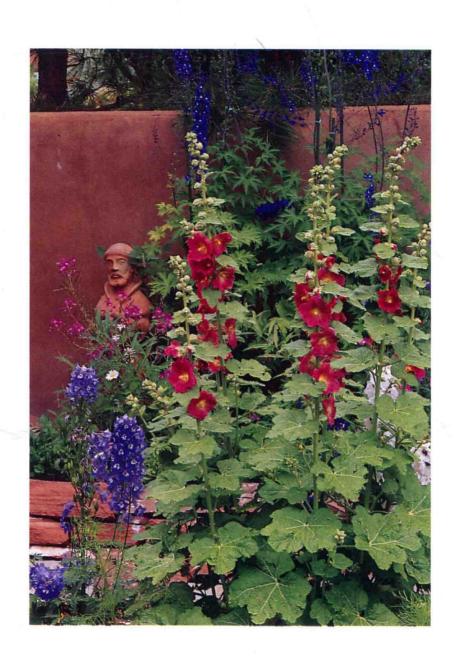
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Achillea 'Coronation Gold'

Yarrows

Achillea

(ah-KILL-ee-ah)

Late-spring to summer bloom

Full sun

Zones 2 to 9

Although yarrows have a long, rich history of herbal use—to treat wounds, to reduce fevers, and to control pain - today these easy-to-grow, long-blooming perennials are most likely to be found in flower gardens. Most yarrows produce their tiny flowers in dense, flat-topped or slightly rounded clusters (called corymbs) on tall, stiff stems above the leaves. They bloom from late spring into midsummer, and many bloom intermittently well into fall. Flower colors include pale to deep golden yellow, white, pink, rose-red, and salmon. The fernlike foliage is aromatic and may be green, blue-gray, or gray-green; some people develop a skin rash if they come in contact with it. While the tallest yarrows can reach 4 or even 5 feet in height, most commonly cultivated ones are between 11/2 and 3 feet tall.

Yarrows make outstanding cut flowers, and few perennials surpass them as dried flowers—they hold their color exceptionally well. For long-lasting fresh or dried blooms, cut the flowers when about half their buds have opened. They can be dried upside down in bunches in a warm, dry place. Or let them dry upright in a vase with 2 to 3 inches of water in it. Do not replace the water when it is used up, and the flowers will dry in place.

SELECTING YARROWS

The genus *Achillea* contains many weedy species that aren't particularly ornamental. While these are fine for meadow gardens and wild areas, select named cultivars for garden beds and borders. Even the cultivated kinds have characteristics of

their wild relatives: yarrows can spread rapidly into broad, dense clumps, and as a result they need dividing frequently.

One of the most popular yarrows is 'Coronation Gold', a hybrid that bears 4- to 5-inchwide, mustard yellow flowers on 3- to $3^{1/2}$ -foot stems all summer long. It tolerates a wide range of conditions, including hot, humid summers, and can be grown in Zones 3 to 9. 'Moonshine', another popular hybrid, has gray-green foliage and bears sulphur yellow blooms all summer on 1- to 2-foot stems. It does not tolerate heat and humidity as well and is best in Zones 3 to 8.

Several cultivars of common yarrow (A. millefolium), a vigorous to invasive native species hardy in Zones 3 to 9, are suitable for the garden and bear flowers in pink, red, and pastel shades. These include 'Cerise Queen', 'Fire King', 'Summer Pastels', and the new Galaxy Series hybrids, all vigorous, mat-forming plants that range from 1½ to 2 feet tall. Woolly yarrow (A. tomentosa), hardy in Zones 3 to 7, bears yellow flowers and remains under 1 foot tall. Because it demands perfect drainage, this species is a good candidate for the rock garden. It does not tolerate heat and humidity well.

Sneezewort (A. ptarmica), which is hardy in Zones 2 to 9, is another tough, long-blooming species that doesn't look like the other commonly grown yarrows. Its leaves are narrow and lanceshaped, and its pure white flowers are borne in loose sprays on 1½- to 2-foot stems. Because it tends to be weedy, stay away from the species and plant only double-flowered cultivars, which have buttonlike, ¾-inch blooms—'The Pearl' is the most popular.

SITE AND SOIL

Yarrows thrive in full sun and average to poor, well-drained soils—even dry or sandy ones. They also grow in the moister, richer conditions of the average perennial garden, provided the soil is well drained. Soil that is too fertile encourages lush, rank growth, resulting in plants that require staking and spread far too quickly. In heavy clay or where the soil may be too wet, planting in raised beds or on slopes is advisable. Loosening the soil deeply with a garden fork and adding organic matter such as compost before planting will also help improve drainage.

PLANTING

Add yarrows to your garden by purchasing plants or starting seeds, which are fast-growing and rewarding. Keep in mind that seed-grown plants are variable, however, so look for plants propagated by division or cuttings if you want a cultivar such as 'Coronation Gold' or 'Moonshine'. Another

option is to purchase seed-grown plants when they are in flower so you can see the color.

Space most yarrows 2 to 3 feet apart to give them plenty of room to spread. Space *A. tomentosa* considerably closer—8 to 9 inches.

CARE THROUGH THE SEASON

Once established, yarrows require very little care to thrive. They don't need to be fertilized and rarely need watering, since they tolerate considerable drought once established. Poor air circulation can lead to powdery mildew. Stem rot and rust can also affect yarrows. Prune out afflicted plant parts and destroy them, then dust plants with sulfur to help control these fungal diseases.

Tall cultivars and plants growing in rich, moist soil probably will need staking. Stake entire clumps rather than individual bloom stalks, as you would peonies. (See "Staking" in the Techniques Glossary for effective systems.)

Deadheading. Cutting off spent blooms is a worthwhile chore because yarrows rebloom, and plants will flower again in about a month after deadheading, thus lengthening the bloom season. Use pruning shears and cut the stems back to just above a branch—if you see new flower buds arising on the stems near the base of the plant, cut just above these.

Division. Yarrows are vigorous spreaders and will need dividing every 3 to 5 years. Dividing keeps the clumps healthy and dense, as well as in bounds. (Pulling up runners that spread too far is a temporary measure for keeping the plants under control.) To divide, dig plants in spring or early fall. Use a sharp spade to cut off the health-iest-looking portions of the clump, and discard older, less vigorous growth at the center of the clump. Replant the divisions in prepared soil or share them with friends.

Propagation. Yarrows can be propagated by division (see above), seed, or cuttings. Seeds germinate in 10 to 15 days at temperatures between 65° and 70°F. The seedlings grow fast—sow seeds indoors in early winter and the plants may bloom, albeit sporadically, the same year.

Take cuttings from the base of the plant as shoots emerge in early spring and root them in a mix of half vermiculite and half perlite. Cuttings taken in summer after the plants have flowered will also root.

LANDSCAPE USES

Use yarrows in sunny beds and borders with summer-blooming perennials such as coreopsis, daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.), and lilies (*Lilium* spp.). Their foliage contrasts nicely with ornamental grasses, yuccas, and bold-leaved perennials and annuals. For a drought-tolerant, lawnlike





ground cover on a dry slope, consider A. mille-folium, which can be mowed and tolerates foot traffic. Or plant other yarrows in drifts as ground covers (admittedly tall ones), let them flower, then cut them down with hedge shears or a string trimmer. Yarrows offer an added bonus to organic gardeners: they attract a variety of beneficial insects to the garden, such as predatory wasps.

TOP Achillea
millefolium 'Fire King'
ABOVE Achillea
millefolium 'Summer
Pastels'



Monkshoods

Aconitum

(ack-oh-NIE-tum)

Summer to fall bloom

Partial shade or full sun

Zones 3 to 8

Common monkshood (Aconitum napellus)

Monkshoods are striking, long-lived perennials invaluable for adding rich blues and purples to the garden from late summer to fall. The common name refers to the hoodlike shape of their individual flowers, which are borne in showy, branched spikes. Another common name, wolfsbane, derives from a more sinister characteristic: the leaves, roots, flowers, and seeds of these plants are all quite poisonous; the roots, where the poison is most concentrated, were once used to poison wolves.



The most commonly grown monkshoods, which are also referred to simply as aconites, are clump-forming perennials grown for their erect, branched spikes of deep blue, purple, or blue-and-white flowers. White- and pale yellow-flowered selections are also available. In addition, monkshoods offer deeply cut foliage that is attractive all season long. (While they make fine cut flowers, monkshoods should be kept out of reach of small children for obvious reasons. Don't include them in arrangements that household pets such as cats might be tempted to sample, either.)

SELECTING MONKSHOODS

Although the most popular monkshoods are similar in appearance, planting more than one species or cultivar is an easy way to extend the bloom season at a time of year when garden color is on the wane in many plantings. Azure monkshood (Aconitum carmichaelii) is a popular species that bears its rich blue blooms from late summer through fall (from August or September to October) and averages 2 to 3 feet in height, although plants can exceed 5 feet. Hardy in Zones 3 to 7, it can survive in Zone 2 with protection. Common monkshood (A. napellus), hardy in Zones 3 to 8, is 3 to 4 feet tall and bears blue-violet flowers in mid- to late summer, generally in July and August. A. \times cammarum (formerly A. \times bicolor), hardy in Zones 3 to 7, is also 3 to 4 feet tall. It bears blue, violet, purple, or bicolor flowers from mid- to late summer. Several cultivars of this hybrid species are available, including 'Blue Sceptre' and 'Bressingham Spire', which reach only 3 feet and need no staking. Wolfsbane (A. vulparia), hardy in Zones 4 to 8, bears pale vellow flowers on 2- to 6-foot plants from midsummer to early fall (July to September).

SITE AND SOIL

Bloom season and color are reason enough to plant monkshoods, but these plants also relish a site in partial or dappled shade, which makes them even more valuable. They won't tolerate deep shade, but they will grow in full sun. A site that receives afternoon shade is best in southern zones, where monkshoods struggle with summer heat. (They won't grow well in areas where night temperatures do not drop below 70°F.) Rich soil that has plenty of organic matter and remains evenly moist, but not wet, is best. Tall monkshoods have heavy, brittle stems that can break in wind and rain, so choose a protected site.

PLANTING

Plant monkshoods in early spring or early fall. Dig the soil deeply and work in plenty of organic matter. Space them generously—established plants resent transplanting and can be left in place for many years. For larger species and cultivars (over 3 feet tall), allow 2 feet between plants; smaller types can be spaced slightly closer, between 1 and $1^{1/2}$ feet. Handle the plants carefully: the large, fleshy, tuberlike roots are easily broken. Pot up or plant individual shoots that break off the clump with a piece of root attached. With luck they'll grow into full-size plants. Protect fall-planted clumps with evergreen boughs, cornstalks, or salt hay after the first hard freeze to prevent them from heaving out of the soil during winter.

Since monkshoods emerge late in spring, mark the location of the clumps with a permanent label. Otherwise, it's easy to damage the crowns inadvertently early in the season with a misplaced spade.

CARE THROUGH THE SEASON

In the right site, monkshoods need very little care during the season. Because they require evenly moist soil for best performance, and do not tolerate drought, water deeply during dry spells. Drought-stricken plants look diseased—the leaves turn black and curl, stalks die, and flowers fail to appear. Beyond that, feeding and staking are the two major chores you'll have to attend to. After the foliage has turned brown in fall, cut the plants to the ground.

Fertilizing. Monkshoods benefit from an annual spring feeding with a mix of well-rotted manure and compost. Spread a 1- to 2-inch layer around the plants, keeping it well away from the stems. If you like, top it in late spring or early summer with a layer of shredded bark or other mulch, again kept away from the stems, to help control weeds and retain soil moisture.

Staking. Taller monkshoods, and those growing in very rich soil, need staking to keep them upright and to protect the brittle stems. Arrangements of stakes-and-string or commercial staking systems such as hoops or linking stakes work fine, provided they're sturdy enough for these large plants. (See "Staking" in the Techniques Glossary for illustrations of effective systems.) Install them early in the season, before the plants threaten to flop. Add a second tier of supports, as necessary, for very tall monkshoods.

Division. Although happiest when left undisturbed, monkshoods can be divided in early spring or fall. Divide plants if they become overcrowded or outgrow their space. Since the seeds are difficult to germinate, division also is the best way to propagate these plants so you can share them with friends. Wear rubber gloves when handling the roots (rubbing the plant's sap on skin will cause tingling and numbness), and be sure to keep your hands away from your face, espe-



Azure monkshood (Aconitum carmichaelii)

cially your eyes and mouth. Cut the clumps apart with a sharp spade and replant the divisions in prepared soil at the depth at which they were growing. Water thoroughly. Protect plants divided in fall with a covering of evergreen boughs or other mulch over winter.

Potential Problems. Monkshoods are occasionally attacked by verticillium wilt, a fungal disease that causes leaves and stems to wilt and turn brown quickly. Dig afflicted plants and prune out all diseased growth, and discard—do not compost—it. Replant the clumps in a new site with clean, uninfected soil that is well drained. Poorly drained conditions also can cause crown rot.

LANDSCAPE USES

Because of their height, monkshoods are best grown at the back of the border, although shorter selections can be placed farther forward in plantings. (If small children spend time in your garden, a back-of-the-border site will help keep monkshoods out of their reach.) Never plant monkshoods near the vegetable garden, where their somewhat turniplike roots could be harvested by mistake.

Combine monkshoods with other summerto fall-blooming perennials, including asters, chrysanthemums, fall-blooming anemones (Anemone × hybrida, A. hupehensis, and A. tomentosa), and sneezeweed (Helenium autumnale). Plants that thrive in partial shade such as hostas, hardy begonias (Begonia grandis), and snakeroots (Cimicifuga spp.) make good companions, too.



monkshood
(Aconitum napellus)



Ajugas, Bugleweeds

Ajuga

(ah-JEW-gah)

Spring bloom

Partial shade or full sun

Zones 3 to 9



Common bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans* 'Bronze Beauty')

■ Also called bugleweeds or just plain bugles, ajugas are vigorous, easy-to-grow perennials most often planted as ground covers or edging plants. They bear short, dense spikes of tiny, two-lipped flowers in shades of cobalt blue to blue-purple. Pink- and white-flowered cultivars are available as well. Although the flowers are small, the display is striking for a few weeks in late spring or early summer. Ajugas have spoon-shaped, somewhat spinachlike leaves borne in dense rosettes. While most common ajugas have deep green leaves, variegated cultivars are also available. The foliage is about 6 inches tall; when in bloom, the plants range from 6 to 12 inches in height.

SELECTING AJUGAS

Gardeners treasure these ground-hugging plants more for their foliage and carpeting habit than for their flowers. One important consideration is the speed at which the plants spread. Common bugleweed (Ajuga reptans) spreads via fast-growing stolons, which are stems that run along the ground and produce new plants along their length. In the right site, it is a terrific ground cover; in the wrong one, it can be quite invasive, especially in southern gardens. 'Catlin's Giant' and 'Jungle Beauty' are large-leaved, vigorous spreaders that are ideal for covering large areas. Variegated cultivars still spread but are less vigorous than green-leaved selections. These include 'Burgundy Glow' and 'Multicolor', both with white, pink, and green leaves, as well as 'Silver Beauty', with gray-green leaves edged in white.

Both A. genevensis and A. pyramidalis spread less vigorously than A. reptans. A. pyramidalis produces stolons, but unlike A. reptans it does so only at the end of the season. Its cultivar 'Metallica Crispa' has handsome, crinkled, almost metallic-looking leaves that are dark green with ample amounts of bronze-purple. A. genevensis, hardy only to Zone 4, does not produce stolons but does spread slowly by rhizomes.

SITE AND SOIL

Ajugas grow in sun or shade, but a site with light to partial shade is best—a spot in the dappled shade under high trees is ideal, as is a site with

morning sun and afternoon shade. Well-drained, average to rich soil that is evenly moist, but not wet, is fine. A. pyramidalis will tolerate wetter conditions than the other two species. A. genevensis prefers drier conditions, but it tolerates more sun than the other two species if it is in constantly moist soil. A. reptans easily spreads into grass, so avoid planting it along a lawn. Installing an edging strip (plastic, metal, or brick) between lawn and bed, along with trimming off wayward stolons, will help contain it.

PLANTING

Plant ajugas in spring or fall—or even in summer provided you keep them well watered. Space spreading types 12 to 15 inches apart; non-spreading selections, about half that distance. Close spacing is also best for variegated cultivars if your objective is a tight mat of plants in short order. Fellow gardeners who have beds of ajuga will surely have plants to spare, so don't hesitate to beg divisions if you want to start a planting.

Mulch to keep down weeds and to keep the soil moist and cool until plantings fill in. Pull weeds regularly so they do not get a foothold in new plantings.

CARE THROUGH THE SEASON

Like other good ground covers, ajugas remain attractive with a minimum of care. Leave the flower spikes on the plants to wither, or remove them if you have the time. In small plantings, pruning shears work fine for this—cut the flower spikes back to the foliage. Large plantings require a more efficient approach. Try hedge shears or a well-aimed string trimmer, or simply mow off the flower stalks with the lawn mower after setting the blade at its highest setting.

In poor soil, feed the plants with a light mulch of well-rotted manure—compost mulch is also a good way to feed the plants and enrich the soil at the same time. Water ajugas in times of drought. In fall, rake fallen leaves off ajugas to prevent the plants from being smothered.

Propagation. Expanding plantings is easy with ajugas, which can be divided at any time during the growing season. Simply dig the clumps, separate the individual rosettes, and replant. Another option is rooting cuttings taken from the stolons. In this case, cut the stolons just below a node and root them in a sterile, moist mix such as half peat moss and half vermiculite. Or simply cut off the small plantlets that arise on the stolons and grow them in potting soil until they are established enough to be moved to the garden. Since cultivars must be propagated by division or cuttings (they do not come true from seed), ajuga is seldom grown from seed.