



Part of the Ashwood Nurseries' *Hepatica* display at the Chelsea Flower Show

# A Journey Up the Rocky Road of *Hepatica*

GLENN SHAPIRO

HEPATICAS ARE ONE of the most stunningly beautiful early spring flowers, coming in a spectacular range of colors. A snow melt plant of mountain woodlands, hepaticas often grow on the side of village footpaths of local communities in every continent of the Northern Hemisphere, but sadly not in England or the rest of the United Kingdom. Perhaps that is one reason why I love and appreciate them all so much and decided to dedicate myself to growing them.

Recently, hepaticas gained a huge boost to their popularity since Ashwood Nurseries won not only a gold medal but the 'Diamond Jubilee Award,' the very top award in the Floral Marquee, for their exhibit at Chelsea Flower Show in May 2016. This was the first, and possibly the last, time that hepaticas have been exhibited at Chelsea. This award was an extremely well-deserved appreciation of the huge amount of work and skill required to exhibit perfect early-spring flowering mountain plants out of season, something those of us who were lucky enough to see will never forget. The display was the incarnation of a lifelong dream of the nursery's owner, John Massey, our doyen of *Hepatica*, and a wonderful source of help and inspiration to me.

*Hepatica* (named for the liver-shaped leaves, once thought to be of medicinal value for liver diseases) is a member of my favorite plant family Ranunculaceae, the buttercups. It was formerly classified as *Anemone hepatica*, and in the light of recent DNA analysis, it is indeed closely related to that genus. Since DNA analysis, the number and names of the species within the genus are also up for debate but currently stand at 12. If the recent DNA evidence is adopted, I may need to do a lot of re-labeling among the species within my collection! However, anyone serious about *Hepatica* is already unlikely to feel confident about the established nomenclature, so in this article, I will use the names commonly used by enthusiasts.

Here in the UK, hepaticas are not native, so most of our gardeners have never heard of them. Back in the early 1990s, we had a huge problem with rabbits and deer in our garden, so I had to grow my special favorite plants in a shady enclosed concrete yard next to the house. The yard housed pots of hellebores, early flowering bulbs, and clematis, but a bit of research led me to that extra something:

hepaticas, a plant I had never seen except in photos. The first plants in my collection were two selections of the European species *Hepatica nobilis* in blue and indigo, *H. nobilis* var. *pyrenaica* 'Apple Blossom,' and an American *H. acutiloba* with particularly lovely clean, white, upward-facing flowers. The plants arrived bare root by post from Ashwood Nurseries and were



My hepatica house

just starting to flower. I was enchanted; no photographs I had ever seen had done them justice. When I gazed into the deep iridescent indigo and pristine white flowers before diving back into the chaos to assist lamb deliveries from my Bluefaced Leicester ewes, I knew that hepaticas had entered my life in a big way. Today the lambing barn has been converted into my hepatica house. Let us take a walk around my collection benches, which I have organized in species order.

### European Hepaticas

*Hepatica nobilis* is widespread over most of Europe, up to the Arctic Circle in Scandinavia in the north and eastward to the Volga River in Russia. This species is found at sea level in the far north but only in the cool mountain woodlands further south as most hepaticas prefer to be covered by snow in winter. In the wild, shades of blue are the most common color, but pink and white are also found. *H. nobilis* var. *glabrata* is small, pure white, and hairless and is found only in Sweden. *H. nobilis* var. *pyrenaica*, found in the Pyrenees, has marbled foliage and flowers in soft pastel colors. In cultivation, the patterned leaves will provide year-round interest if not covered with snow. A very lovely new marbled form is *H. nobilis* 'Stained Glass'.

Most of the named double cultivars of *H. nobilis* were originally collected from the wild and, if you are lucky, you may find some plants in specialist nurseries' lists. Many of the double blues are rather similar and expensive but *H. nobilis* Multipetala Group, a seed-raised semi-double form, is a good alternative. An old deep pink, *H. nobilis*



Clockwise from top left: *Hepatica nobilis* 'Rubra Plena', 'Indigo Blue', var. *pyrenaica* 'Stained Glass', 'Mussel Plena'

'Rubra Plena', is the most readily available and the only double I would recommend growing in a UK garden. White *H. nobilis* doubles are the hardest to come by, and I only have one, known as *H. nobilis* 'Double White'. I did have it in the garden, but the flowers are so heavy that they flop when they are wet, so now I grow it under cover. Personally, I usually prefer single-flowered hepaticas; the stamens can look stunning. All the single *H. nobilis* grow well if planted in a suitable spot in my garden, which is on a limestone cliff in the mild, but often very wet, northwest of England. Hepaticas often thrive in limestone, but I think that is more to do with drainage than pH because the leaf litter on the surface is quite acidic. I used to add lime to my potting compost, but they grow just as well without it.

*Hepatica transsilvanica* is the only other European species, and it is confined to Romania, mostly in the Carpathian Mountains, but also thrives on lower wooded hillsides in the surrounding alkaline areas of Transylvania. Where the range of *H. transsilvanica* and *H. nobilis* overlap, the two will cross to make *Hepatica* x *media*, which is generally sterile.

*H. transsilvanica* and the *H. x media* cultivars make excellent garden plants. They are larger and tougher than *H. nobilis*. You can grow



Clockwise from top left: *Hepatica transsilvanica* 'Blumenstadt Erfurt', 'Mrs. Alison Spence', 'Super Nova', and *H. x media* 'Blue Jewel'

them in semi-shade if it is moist and well-drained. A south-facing slope under deciduous trees or shrubs is ideal. As with all hepaticas, they need the light to open the flowers fully in the spring, followed by the shade from the trees as their new leaves appear to prevent scorching. On all species, but especially *H. transsilvanica*, it is best to remove some of the old leaves in early spring because they tend to hide the flowers. *H. transsilvanica* extends short suckers through the leaf litter, so it eventually forms large clumps, while *H. x media* has a tighter growth habit more like its *H. nobilis* parent.

The only double cultivars of *H. transsilvanica* are 'Mrs. Alison Spence' and the almost identical 'Konny Greenfield', and they both grow well in my garden. There are many lovely blue singles. *H. transsilvanica* 'Super Nova' is dramatically dark and is one of several beautiful selections bred by Andreas Händel in Germany. A common pink form is known as 'Lilacina', while for white try 'Eisvogel' (Kingfisher) with blue feathery marks on the reverse of each petal (more correctly, sepal). For early flowers, look for 'Winterfreude' or 'Blumenstadt Erfurt'. It is important for me as a collection holder to look for plants of historic interest, such as the first named crosses that

became available between different species. For example, I collect plants that have been written about in old journals and plants with connections to pioneers or that have their own interesting stories. The first UK *H. x media* 'Ballardii', the work of Ernest Ballard in about 1917, ticks most of these boxes. It is very beautiful but slow to increase and consequently it is on the Plant Heritage Red List of threatened cultivars. Another *H. x media* I would not be without is the very easy to grow 'Blue Jewel'. I have it in a heavy glazed pot on the outside windowsill of my northwest facing office where it flowers its socks off all spring, delighting all. Pots like this, glazed on the outside only, are a very good way to grow hepatica if you don't have suitable garden space.

### **American Hepaticas**

*Hepatica acutiloba* is widespread in the deciduous alkaline mountain woodlands of northern USA and Canada, tolerating damper conditions than *H. americana* (see below). *H. acutiloba* often has sharply pointed leaves, a feature positively selected by breeders and collectors. The tall, upward-facing flowers are usually white, though sometimes pale pink or blue, and are occasionally fragrant. Forms in purple and dark blue sometimes turn up in cultivated populations, and it would be interesting to know if this is also true in the wild. One of my favorite hepaticas is the American cultivar 'Millstream Merlin', a spontaneous hybrid of uncertain parentage, found in the garden of the North American Rock Garden Society's former president H. Lincoln Foster and his wife, Laura Louise. It is a frequent prize winner on our Alpine Garden Society (AGS) show benches, perhaps because the very striking deep violet color is accentuated by the lack of stamens. Merlin is even happy in our mild, wet UK gardens where it is always the last to finish flowering. Another much sought after American cultivar in my collection is the very pretty double form of *H. acutiloba* named 'Louisa Koehler', which combines shades of pink and lavender blue, but I would not risk this one in my garden.

It was another spontaneous *H. acutiloba* cross that really got me involved in the early days. My first four hepaticas thrived in pots in the yard, moving from the sunnier patches in spring to the shadow of the surrounding buildings in summer. I collected seed, and although I started with only blue *H. nobilis*, I was delighted when cerise seedlings also appeared. I had not thought about cross pollinating until one day I was thrilled by a particular seedling in the *H. nobilis* var. *pyrenaica* 'Apple Blossom' pot. The seedling had the typically marbled foliage of 'Apple Blossom', but it also had the sharply pointed lobes of its neighboring *H. acutiloba*. Sure enough, as luck would have it, it was a rather special hybrid, producing masses of lavender-blue flowers that last for many weeks because, like most hepatica hybrids, it does not



Clockwise from top left: *H.* 'Millstream Merlin', *H. americana*, *H.* x 'Hazelwood Froggie', *H. americana* 'Louisa Koehler'

produce seed. I named it 'Hazelwood Froggie' because the emerging marbled foliage among the pale blue flowers in the spring reminded me of clusters of spawning frogs in our pond. It has also proved to be very happy in our open garden, unlike its *acutiloba* pollen parent.

*Hepatica americana* grows in most of the same areas as *H. acutiloba* but is more prominent further north. It often grows in woodland at higher altitudes up to 4000 feet (1200 m) in dry situations, sometimes in the root clefts up against tree trunks, often in acidic soil. *H. americana* is smaller and more compact than *H. acutiloba*, with rounded evergreen foliage, sometimes beautifully marbled. The flowers come in white or pastel shades of pinks, lavenders and blues, some with lighter picotee edges or darker centers, and are framed by large bracts. I have several *H. americana* cultivars and selections in my collection. 'Ashwood Marble' is a UK seed strain with pretty lavender flowers and hairy marbled leaves, while 'Ashwood Flare' has a larger white

flower with a deep violet center. I am still looking for Don Jacobs' selections including 'Eco Regal Blue' and 'Eco White Fluff', and also 'Elkins Double' and the cut leaf form of *H. acutiloba*. These would complete my *H. americana* and *H. acutiloba* collection benches, so any information would be welcome! My impression is that although North America has a very diverse mix of flower colors and leaf forms in the wild population, they have been less exploited by plant breeders than in Europe and Japan.

### Asian Hepaticas

*Hepatica asiatica* is confined to northern and eastern China, Korea, and the far east of Russia. The foliage looks like *H. nobilis* but is deciduous with mainly pink to purple flowers. I have examples in white and pink. This, like some of the other less dramatic species, doesn't seem to have any cultivars.

*Hepatica falconeri* was thought to be extinct until recent years when it was rediscovered along the "Silk Road" in the Pamir mountains



Clockwise from top left: *H. henryi* 'Flora Plena', *H. henryi* 'Rosea', *H. falconeri*,  
*H. insularis*



Clockwise from top left: *H. japonica* 'Tensei', *H. japonica* 'Ryokkou', Plants from an AGS show labelled, catalogued and ready to join my collection, *H. x eurasia* 'Surprise'

of Kashmir, northern Pakistan, and large populations in Kyrgyzstan. Found on rocky slopes in mixed woodland, between 6,000 and 8,000 feet (1,835 to 2,500 m), *H. falconeri* was considered to be the link between *Hepatica* and *Anemone*. Like an anemone, it has a much lower bract than the other hepaticas. The flowers are small and white, while the foliage is deciduous and deeply divided, often with lighter blotches.

*Hepatica henryi* is from Hubei and Chongqing (formerly part of Sichuan) provinces of China growing among deciduous woodland and bamboo at altitudes of 4,500 to 6,000 feet (1,400 to 1,800 m). *H. henryi* is a small, compact species with scalloped leaves that often take on an attractive bronze tinge in the spring. The flowers are white, pink or pale blue, often with protruding bracts with three notches. A few wild-collected fully double varieties of this species have found their way into cultivation. My tiny *H. henryi* 'White Plena' was probably collected from the wild, but I rescued it from a nursery giving up hepaticas, so I don't feel too guilty about that. Almost dead when I got it, the plant has



Clockwise from top left: *H. japonica* 'Yu Zuru', 'Kimon', *H. japonica* yellow flower, a *H. japonica* forma *magna* selection

since thrived and became a great favorite. I have split it and swapped divisions many times.

*Hepatica insularis* is a species from the coastal areas of Korea and some of the off-shore islands. It is closely related to, but more compact than, *H. asiatica*, with similar white or pink flowers and light blotches on the leaves.

*Hepatica japonica* is by far the most important species for hepatica breeders and cultivators. It is known as "Yukiwariso," the snow breaking plant, and the Japanese have been collecting hepaticas from the wild since the 1600s. Several decades ago, large numbers of new mutations appeared, many stunningly beautiful, and this has given fascinating opportunities for further breeding. Most important is the group called *H. japonica* forma *magna*. Found in a few coastal districts on wooded hillsides and almost infinite in its variety, this is the form from which most of the plants labeled *Hepatica japonica* come. Now true reds and yellows have joined the extensive range of colors, but for most of us, it is the intricate detail within the full doubles that enchants.

*H. japonica* 'Tensei' is often flowering in October and usually goes on until the end of March, while *H. japonica* 'Yu Zuru', which translates as "Crane at eventide," grows happily in a strawberry pot on our patio; both would be good choices for a small collection. I also love single flowers, and many of these are named and beautifully marked with contrasting stamens. New hybrids between *Hepatica japonica* and *H. nobilis*, called *Hepatica* x *eurasia*, are becoming available. I have several from Gunhild Poulsen in Denmark including her *H. x eurasia* 'Surprise'.

A serious collector of *Hepatica japonica* needs a greenhouse or cold frame. Though they are hardy, and some are grown outside in the UK, the exquisite flowers are easily spoiled by heavy rain. Inside, they need moist but very free draining compost, shade netting as soon as your local deciduous trees get their new leaves and very good ventilation.

*H. japonica* forma *japonica* is found in small populations growing close to the ground at higher altitudes (1,000 to 3,000 feet; 300-950 m) than *H. japonica* forma *magna*. The leaves are small with three sharply pointed lobes. They have small flowers with fewer pistils and stamens and are mostly ivory colored. Sometimes the flowers are pink to dark purple, and rarely, but very significantly, can be red or pale yellow.

*H. japonica* forma *variegata* needs cooler conditions and is considered difficult to cultivate, but large populations grow in the wild among deciduous woodlands and bamboo at 500 to 2,500 feet (150 to 770 m). This form has more rounded lobed leaves and petals than *H. japonica* forma *japonica* and mostly white flowers.

*H. maxima* is endemic to a single island, Ulleungdo, east of the Korean Peninsula, where it grows in dense shade on steep slopes among camellias and rhododendrons. I grow it successfully in the shadiest end of my hepatica house. *H. maxima* is the largest of the hepaticas, up to 16 inches (40 cm), with leaves 4 to 6 inches (10-15 cm) wide. The flowers are a bit disappointing, relatively small white or slightly pink, surrounded by a large bract. Leaves and bracts are attractively fringed with fine hairs. The black and white seeds, affectionately called panda seeds, remain on the plant, black end out, for several months, looking like blackberries. The hybrid between *H. nobilis* and *H. maxima* is officially *Hepatica* x *schlyteri*, named after Severin Schlyter who produced the first and named it 'Nomax'. These hybrids are excellent plants and commercially available as *H. x schlyteri* Ashwood Hybrids in several colors. The strong cobalt blue is particularly attractive. This hybrid is usually sterile, but there is a distinctly different white *H. x schlyteri* bred by Robin White named 'The Bride' which does come true from seed if kept away from other plants. Strangely, it will also cross back to *H. nobilis* and other species to make complex hybrids that are sometimes fertile.

*H. pubescens* (syn. *H. nobilis* var. *pubescens*, though the DNA suggests it is closer to *H. japonica*) has foliage covered with fine hairs, as the name implies. The flowers are simple in form, often only six rounded petals of white, pink, or violet, and frequently bicolored. The pistils are often a beautiful, contrasting, red color. These are garden-worthy (but expensive) plants that prefer to be kept a bit drier than *H. japonica*.

*H. yamatutai* comes from the wet mixed forests of Mt. Emei in the Sichuan province of China at 3600 to 7000 feet (1100-2100 m), among rocks on steep, well-drained slopes. A large hepatica, the leaves have five and sometimes more pointed notches, often bronze at first and



Clockwise from top left: *H. x schlyteri* 'The Bride', *H. x Schlyteri* Ashwood Hybrid, *H. x euroasiatica* 'Rötesbütteler Röschen', *H. pubescens* 'Tenjinbai'

occasionally boldly marbled. The flowers are ivory white, sometimes with pink on the reverse of the petals. Lovely, new, intense blue-flowered crosses with *H. transsilvanica* are proving to be hardy garden plants.

Hepaticas can be grown from seed, but it needs to be sown while it is fresh and green in late spring, because it is useless if it dries out. You may find seed on exchange lists, but look for ones that are damp packed, or order from suppliers that send out fresh seed in the spring. To germinate, sow your seed on top of very free draining compost and lightly cover with fine grit. Keeping the pot damp, but not wet, until the following year when they will begin to germinate. I leave seedlings in the same pot for another year or two and then pot them individually. My compost is two parts homemade leaf-mold (mostly beech leaves), one part vermiculite or perlite and one part John Innes: use No 2 sieved for seeds but No 3, also sieved, for potting on.

I replot all the plants in my collection every other year, but quite a lot of them are done annually because they need splitting. If you leave them too long, they start to die out in the middle. In a wood, hepaticas get a fresh mulch of leaves each year and put out new roots from the top, while the older roots will be working their way through older leaves that are still breaking down. My fresh leaf-mold compost mix is a good substitute for these unfortunate hepaticas stuck in a pot. To replot, I knock each plant out of the pot and shake off the loose compost. Grasping the leaf stems in one hand, I start to comb out the roots from the bottom until they are all free. This process takes out a lot of the dead and weaker roots. I inspect the remaining roots and remove any that appear old or damaged. If you want a big showy pot full, you could separate the buds slightly at the top and pot them into a larger pot. That is what I used to do until I started running out of space. Now, I split them if they are too big to go back comfortably into the same pot, leaving room for the compost between all the separate roots. Healthy roots will grow very long, but personally, I don't like to fold them along the bottom of the pot. If the roots are too long to fit with a gentle curve, I cut them to the depth of the pot. I start replotting if we get some dull days in August and stop before there is a risk of frost inside my hepatica house. You can also replot straight after flowering, and young plants are best done then because there is less risk of overwatering, which is the easiest way to kill hepaticas. Watch out for slugs and mice outside, and aphids occasionally on new growth indoors.

With all this beauty to choose from, it is easy to see how one might get drawn into a collection. Nobody is going to manage to collect all of them, and some lucky people will end up with exactly the ones they like best. There is nothing like having a large collection to make

you appreciate the huge variability between individual plants within the same species. I try as well to keep as many colors and forms of all the species as I can, even if they are not named. Because I hold a national collection, people are very generous in giving and swapping plants, and equally, it is important for me to help get cultivars back into the nursery trade and to help and encourage people who are taking an interest in the genus.



Clockwise from top left: *H. yamatutai* 'Pink-backed', A large *H. x media* unpotted, With roots combed out, Split into 17 new plants.