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## early flowering biennials for spring

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My spring garden is full of bulbs – scented narcissi, hyacinths and tulips of many different kinds. I also have cherry and apple blossom and patches of early-flowering annuals like *Centaurea* major 'Purpurascens' that have survived the winter outside. There is a good succession of perennial euphorbias, Solomon seal and some hellebores on the shady side, but what none of these gives me is frothy abundance and horizontal drifts and clouds.

Bulbs provide almost everything you want in terms of design - colour, scent and shape, but their vertical nature means they can't create the essential rivers of connection between one thing and the next, the all important mortar to gel the different highlights into a beautiful and cohesive whole.

That's where early flowering biennials come in – wallflowers, honesty and Iceland poppies. These are easy and cheap to grow in tens, or even fifties if you have room, and can be planted in broad brush stroke swathes. And if you like picking flowers, wallflowers and honesty serve the same role in a flower arrangement. You can pick a handful of tulips and put them in a jug and they'll look lovely, but poke them in through a base of contrasting coloured wallflower or a cloud of white honesty with a few stems of *Euphorbia robbiae* or *E. palustris* and you've got flowers fit for a ball.

Picking wallflowers is a must. They have one of the most delicious spring scents, sweet and yet never cloying or overwhelming like hyacinths. The wallflowers and poppies need dead-heading anyway – the honesty's seed pods are lovely, so it's less crucial with them - so why not live, not dead-head? Unlike the bulbs, each of these biennials has a long flowering season. They'll be in flower with your narcissi and hyacinths in March and will still be looking good as the last of your tulips fade and your alliums emerge towards the end of May.

For wallflowers, you can hang on until early autumn and buy bare root plants from the garden centre as winter bedding, but don't. You'll almost always get a dwarf modern hybrid – often 'Persian Tapestry Mix' – a clumsy-looking, stunted thing in brassy colours, with too many acrid yellows and bright reds. Grow your own from seed and you can select the colour to fit with any combination in the garden, and you'll get good tall plants with a decent length of stem. These are more graceful overall and good for picking.

My favourites are the delicious, rich crimson *Erysimum* 'Blood Red' or burnt orange 'Fire King'. I also love the crimson and purple *E. 'Violet'* and have added a *E. 'Ivory White'* to my sowing list.

If you only have a small garden and don't have room for many, wallflowers are very happy in pots. They don't look good as single plants in the border, but are fine in threes or fives. Five will fill a two foot square. Sow a few seeds of each this year and keep the packet cool and dry – not in the greenhouse or potting shed – and sow the rest for next.

The purple honesty pops up in my hedges and in shady empty patches in the garden, so I can dig up seedlings and plant them into my mainstream flower beds, but the white never seems to scatter itself so freely. I'm not so keen on the variegated variety – it looks to me like its got measles – but I love the pure white *Lunaria annua* 'Alba'. It's perfect as a backdrop to *Viridiflora* tulips, 'Spring Green' or 'Groenland'. I also plant it threaded through my artichoke patch. *Globe artichokes* are almost evergreen in my garden but can look a bit weather beaten at the beginning of spring. As they perk themselves up and start to grow more actively through March and April, the honesty covers up for them and then is over and ready to come out



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when they're going at full tilt and needing the extra space.

Two or three weeks after the wallflowers and honesty to emerge into flower is the Iceland poppy, [Papaver nudicaule](#). I have been growing for years and it remains my favourite plant. It's a poppy – and I love poppies – and it has scent which is as far as I know unique, an exotic fragrance like Tazetta narcissus. It comes in perfect subtle colours, with crumpled silk texture, appearing delicate and ethereal, yet being essentially easy to grow and robust. You need to pack the plants in to get them looking their best, spacing them six to eight inches apart, but then you'll have flowers in your garden and in your house that are impossible to resist. To make them last well in a vase, sear their stem ends in boiling water for twenty seconds.

Many will tell you to sow your biennials straight into the ground, but if it's too late for that sow them into large plastic or polystyrene crates, three or four times the size of a usual seed tray and similarly deep, filling them almost to the brim with compost. You should be able to get the containers from a greengrocer or fishmonger. Scatter the seeds as far apart as you can over the surface. The trays don't need to be in a greenhouse, just anyway near a tap that's light and cool. The wallflowers need to be covered by fleece or Enviromesh from the word go or the shiny black flea beetle will devour its leaves as soon as they grow. Sown widely, you don't need to prick them out. With the depth of compost and seedlings well spaced, you can skip that stage.

Once the seedlings reach about an inch, plant them out. If there's not yet room in the garden where you want them to end up, find an empty corner and plant them there. They'll then form chunky plants with good root balls by the early autumn and you can transplant them to their final place. If there's nowhere in the garden for this interim stage, pot them on in two litre pots to keep them growing well until September.

With these plants up your sleeve, your spring garden will be a fuller, more scented rich and colourful place!

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