

## A Native Phlox for Woodland Gardens

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**A** plant that I look forward to each spring is woodland phlox. The one that blooms so prolifically in my garden is *Phlox divaricata* 'Louisiana Purple'. Hundreds of bright purple blooms are held on stems a few inches above the foliage. The bed looks like an Easter basket when the bright purple is combined with the yellows of gold moss sedum (*Sedum acre*), pansies and snapdragons that bloom at the same time.

Native wild blue phlox is often found along streams and in open woods, but it is equally at home at the front of a flower border. It is evergreen in most of the South and spreads at a moderate rate by rhizomes. As a matter of fact, this native phlox grows in large portions of the country (USDA Zones 3-9).

In spring, delicate 1.5-inch rosy-lavender to soft pink five-petaled flowers are held on upright stems above the foliage. Cultivars have been selected with flowers that are bright purple, white, and all shades of pink. Woodland phlox can be grown in sun if moisture is sufficient, but it will go dormant during a drought.

Woodland phlox is perfect for naturalizing at the base of large trees. In fact, they are at home under deciduous trees where they will receive sun during the winter and early spring and be shaded during the summer. Moist, humus-rich, well-drained soil is preferred. If you can manage it, give them morning sun and afternoon shade. The shallow root system benefits from mulch.

Cut off faded blossoms after spring bloom. Although this step is not really necessary, it does make the bed look neater. Fertilize lightly after this annual trim.

The shallow root system and loose structure of the plants make woodland phlox a good choice for overplanting bulbs. Intersperse a few daffodils, summer snowflakes (*Leucojum aestivum*), spider lilies (*Lycoris radiata*), and perhaps some Chinese ground orchids (*Bletilla striata*) among them for color over a long season.

Propagation is easy. Wild sweet William can be started from seeds, cuttings, or division of established clumps. From one clump, a mass can be established in two or three years.

Several cultivars of wild blue phlox have been selected and are widely available at garden centers. Some popular favorites are: 'Clouds of Perfume' (ice-blue, fragrant flowers), 'Fullers White' (fragrant, pure white flowers), 'Laphammi' (lavender blue flowers), 'Louisiana Purple' (deep purple flowers), and x 'Chattahoochee', a cross between woodland phlox and prairie phlox (lavender blue flowers with a maroon eye).

Other species of phlox are also desirable plants with many uses in the garden. Moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*) blooms in the early spring garden, and summer phlox (*Phlox divaricata*) takes the show through the summer. Other perennial species are *Phlox pilosa* (downy phlox), and *Phlox stolonifera* (creeping phlox). *Phlox drummondii* is a seed-grown annual.

A Native Phlox for

This native plant is one of those whose presence you don't notice too much until it blooms. All summer and winter it is a ground-hugging mat of green that frames the edges of the border and allows other summer and fall-blooming flowers to show to best advantage. When it blooms, however, it is such a show-off that it upstages its compatriots.

**At a Glance**

*Phlox divaricata*

*Say:* floks di-var-ih-KAY-tuh

*Family:* Polemoniaceae (Phlox family)

*Other names:* Wild blue phlox, wild sweet William

*Origin:* Eastern North America

*Zones:* 3-9

*Light:* High shade, morning sun

*Water Use Zone:* Moderate

*Size:* 12-18 inches, clumping

*Soil:* Humus-rich, well-drained

*Salt tolerance:* None

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