

A Real Romantic at Heart

Early to bloom, the bleeding heart makes ours flutter, too

THE VERY NAME bleeding heart has an aura of old-fashioned romance. And the flower's appearance enhances the mood. The bloom looks precisely like its name—a tiny dangling heart pierced at the tip by a single inner white petal.

For some reason, *Dicentra spectabilis*, as it's known in Latin, reminds me of a Victorian lady pining for an errant lover. Ideally, she might be soothing her pain by soaking in a scented bath. This would be appropriate since another common name for *Dicentra spectabilis* is lady-in-the-bath. Hold the flower upside down and pull the ends slightly open and it's easy to imagine a graceful woman in a sculpted tub.

Whichever way I look at it, I'm touched by *Dicentra spectabilis*. Perhaps because it is so fleeting—the entire plant goes dormant in the heat of summer. Or because it's string of dangling flowers seem as delicate as an heirloom necklace. And since we're naming names, the genus name *Dicentra* comes



Irene Virag

from two Greek words—*di*, meaning two, and *kentron*, or spur, referring to the plant's unusual double-spurred blossom. The species name *spectabilis* is Latin for remarkable. It's also called lady's locket and lyre flower, which further embroider its charm and add to the charisma of bygone days.

Victorian gardeners were crazy about bleeding hearts from the start. It was a start with a spirit of adventure thanks to the famous plant hunter Robert Fortune. Not only was he the first collector to go to China after the Treaty of Nanking gave the British access to the interior of a mysterious land but when he set sail in 1843, he carried a Chinese dictionary and three of the new Wardian Cases—miniature sealed glass greenhouses that made it possible to transport live specimens across the ocean.

Within three years, Fortune had learned the language, earned the Chinese name Sing Wah and collected many exotic plants that were unknown in his homeland. He brought back winter jasmine, *Weigela*, winter honeysuckle, Japanese anemones, Pompon chrysanthemums—and bleeding hearts.

By the way, Fortune returned to China a few years later. This time he had a secret mission: to learn the intricacies of growing tea and to smuggle plants to India for cultivation. Disguised in native clothing and a phony pigtail, he purloined 20,000 tea plants, sent them from Shanghai to the Himalayas in Wardian Cases and launched the tea industry in India and Ceylon.



White bleeding hearts, above, and pink bleeding hearts, at right, may not have color in common but both share a love of shade.

Eventually he retired and became a farmer in Scotland.

But back to bleeding hearts. Actually, it was just a single plant from the Grotto Gardens on the island of Chusan that Robert Fortune shipped back to England. He gave it to his benefactors at the Royal Horticultural Society. The plant adapted beautifully to the English climate, was easy to propagate and became an overnight sensation in the spring garden.

It still is.

Bleeding hearts are among the earliest perennials to bloom. They bring grace and elegance to the shade garden with their deeply cut, fern-like blue-green foliage and their arching stems strung with the perfectly named white-tipped flowers. They grow two to three feet tall and just as wide. Bleeding hearts like rich moist soil in a shady spot—they're happiest in light shade but they'll do fine without any sun. They're very easy to grow and come back year after year.

I have both pink and white varieties in the shade gardens in the front and back of my house. They get along nicely in the company of other shade lovers like ferns and hostas and Solomon's seal and trilliums and mayapples and astilbes. And best of all, these pretty perennial neighbors fill in bare spots left when the bleeding hearts fizzle and disappear in the dog days of summer. I find this whimsical game of hide-and-seek utterly charming and it adds to my delight when *Dicentra spectabilis* shows up again in the spring.

It wasn't until almost two decades after Robert Fortune's expedition that *Dicentra spectabilis* showed up on this side of the ocean. Of course, America al-



Newsday Photos / Tony Jerome

ready had its very own bleeding hearts—colorful members of the *Dicentra* genus with imaginative names like golden eardrops and squirrel corn. There is also fringed bleeding heart or *Dicentra eximia*—a native of East Coast woodlands that is smaller and hardier than *spectabilis* but less showy. It comes in pink or white, blooms sporadically all summer and even self-sows. And Pacific bleeding heart, or *Dicentra formosa*, which charmed the pioneers as they moved westward with its pale rosy lavender blooms. Both of these species are becoming better known and appreciated as are the delicate yellow-tipped white flowers of *Dicentra cucullaria* or Dutchman's breeches.

I suppose some people might see a perversely romantic connotation in the name Dutchman's breeches, but I'm not going to go there. It certainly doesn't conjure up images of a gentle Victorian lady, which is the way I like to think of this fair and delicate genus. It is the old-fashioned common bleeding heart that Robert Fortune shipped to England in a miniature glass greenhouse that graces my garden each spring and captures my fancy. ■

THE POTTING SHED

Ah, There Are the Rubs

BY NOW YOU'RE probably pooped from planting, worn out from weeding, and aching from all that raking. So take a break from tending the plants and let some of the plants tend you instead. Gardener's Sore Muscle Soak, Gardener's Hand Scrub and Gardener's Cooler, all available from the Williamsburg catalog for \$12 each, are botanical restoratives, blending such ingredients as witch hazel, lavender and lemongrass, among other things, to cultivate a bumper crop of comfort. Call 800-446-9240 or visit www.williamsburgmarketplace.com.

— Caryn Eve Murray



These soaks will make you a much more tender tender.