

## **Bleeding Heart**

By Kirk Jones

Before I really knew anything about perennials, I went to the old Hertler Brothers store downtown with a friend to find some plants for my house. The yard was full of overgrown shrubs and trees at the time so I needed things that could grow in some shade. Hertler's had many different bare root perennials packed in sawdust and packaged in plastic bags. My friend pointed to one package and said, "Get a bleeding heart. They're really beautiful and look different from anything else you've ever seen. I planted one at our last house and every year it just got bigger and bigger." The bare root bleeding heart hardly even looked alive, just some thick fleshy roots and a couple green sprouts, but the picture looked nice, so I bought it and planted it under a huge lilac in front of the house. This was in the spring of 1988, and that summer we had a terrible drought. I can't remember what the bleeding heart did that first year, but it survived the drought with minimal care and emerged the following spring, and every spring thereafter.

Bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis*) is one of the first large perennials to begin blooming in the spring. They have beautiful, divided, fern-like foliage. The individual flowers are heart shaped and are borne on foot long horizontal stems, about a dozen per stem. Each pink heart shaped flower has a tiny white droplet hanging from the bottom of it, hence the "bleeding heart". Each plant will produce dozens of these wands of flowers over several weeks beginning in May and lasting into June. The mature plant creates a stunning tiered effect that is delicate but at the same time imposing. There is a pure white form as well as the usual pink form, and to me they are equally beautiful.

As my friend said, bleeding hearts get larger and larger each year and they live a long time. By the time I moved from my house last year, the twelve year old bleeding heart was more than 3 feet tall and almost five feet wide when it was in bloom. Because the plants are so large, and because part of its beauty is the graceful way the wands of flowers project all around it, I think bleeding hearts look best as specimen plants.

### **Culture**

The size of the plant will depend some on the amount of sun it receives. Bleeding hearts are often touted as shade plants, but they will not grow well in deep shade like hostas will. They seem to do best in either light dappled shade cast by trees like locusts or dogwoods, or beneath trees limbed up high enough to allow direct sun in the morning and afternoon. They can even tolerate nearly full sun but will tend to burn up and go dormant a bit sooner in the summer. They prefer the shade lover's usual evenly moist, humus rich soil, but will grow pretty well in any decently amended garden soil you have.

Bleeding hearts sometimes self seed a bit, but never enough to be a pest. Mine always self sowed, but I have read that some plants self seed and others do not. If new plants do appear, though, the plant is so choice that there will always be people waiting to take them. I used to donate the young plants to Project Grow's annual Grow Sale and they were always the first thing people snapped up. If you are growing both pink and white

varieties, you can easily tell the white form from the pink even when they are not in bloom. The white plants will emerge bright green and mature into a medium green. The pink plants emerge a pinkish green and the leaves mature to a darker bluish green than the white form.

### **Companion plants**

Pink bleeding hearts look terrific with blue flowers. The most classic combination is bleeding heart and Siberian bugloss (*Brunnera macrophylla*). The Brunnera has large heart shaped leaves, true blue forget-me-not like flowers and it blooms at exactly the same time as the bleeding heart. The foliage is quite attractive and a nice contrast with the bleeding heart's leave. However, I have never had great luck growing them so I usually preferred to combine them with forget-me-nots or even grape hyacinths. The white form will look nice with almost any other color, and planted alongside blue hostas is a classic choice for the all-white, semi-shady garden.

### **Sources**

Bleeding hearts are easy to find, either packaged bare-root in early spring, or in containers at garden centers and the Farmer's Market. Even large plants can be moved quite easily, especially if it is done in early spring before growth really gets going.

Given all their great features, it is easy to forgive the bleeding heart its one fault - it tends to go dormant (that is, the foliage dies back) in midsummer. How early this happens seems to vary some from year to year depending on heat, moisture and how much sun the plant is getting. In my gardens they usually go dormant by late July or August. But, as Patrick Lima writes in *The Harrowsmith Perennial Garden*, "If not for this one fault they would be the perfect perennial".

*Kirk gardens at County Farm and is on the board of Project Grow.*