

FAIRY WINGS by Barbara Evans

Fairy Wings! Who wouldn't want such a delightfully named flowering plant in their garden? And it truly does look like the delicate wings of fairies when in bloom around May in our area.

Fairy Wings is a common name for Epimedium, a genus of flowering plants in the family Berberidaceae. These hardy and dependable plants with heart-shaped leaves and sprays of tiny dancing fairy flowers in May have a number of common names. Another popular name is 'horny goat weed' as the plant is prized in Asian cultures for its medicinal value as a libido-enhancer, so-named after a licentious goat. Other nicknames include 'Bishop's cap' and 'Barrenwort'. All these names for plants only recently available at our nurseries.



Alas, while there is not a native species in the bunch, Epimediums are worthy plants none the less. Touted as being the perfect plant for dry shade, they are easy and long lived. Blooming in spring in all shades except blue; those with long spurs resemble dancing spiders – a description only a gardener would appreciate. Their blooms are lovely when planted with daffodils and other late spring bulbs. Their foliage will fill in the bare spaces left when the spring ephemerals go dormant.

In general, Epimediums range in height from 6" to 24" in bloom. Expect early leaflets around April, then sprays of flowers followed by another round of foliage taller

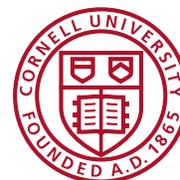
than the initial spring growth. Their shallow-rooted rhizomes of various lengths sit at or near the soil surface and can remain without disturbance for many years. Needing little to no boost from fertilizer, the only care they require is an annual haircut in spring before the new foliage and bloom stalks appear. Cut the old foliage off of the evergreen varieties also since they will then give you

a whole new crop of fresh leaves. Some are clump formers, and others are steady spreaders forming colonies of textural ground covering. Tuck them here and there in the garden: under large leaved Hostas, around tree roots to protect from lawn mowers, and as filler for any empty areas. Some varieties have amazing foliage color changes in the fall and some provide winter interest due to being semi-evergreen or evergreen in our zone 5-6 gardens. Since not all of them behave in the same manner though, check on-line if possible before purchasing. A spreader will not stay in one special spot and a clumper won't fill in between tree roots. Note also that some are

good in rock gardens and troughs, having mini leaves and stature.

Similar to other plants said to like dry shade, they don't prefer that condition but tolerate it very well. In the wild they are usually found in moist and often sunny sites. Planted in 1/2 to 3/4 sun increases the boldness of their fall foliage coloration. A few do require more moisture than others, although all benefit from extra water when first planted out. Thus, while tolerating the dry-ish and less fertile areas under trees, they are also great as edging for beds and borders. In short, they are highly versatile plants. A further plus is that they have no disease or insect problems to mention. New hybrids and newly discovered species, mostly from China, have added to their diversity, both in cultural preferences and growth habits. Significant additional information can be found

on-line at Garden Vision Epimediums and Plant Delights Nursery, Inc.



Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities; and provides equal program and employment opportunities.



© Copyright 2019 All Rights Reserved