

Full of Easter promise

The exquisite velvety blooms of pasque flowers are opening now on Kew's Rock Garden – one of the true highlights of spring for **Richard Wilford**



The pasque flower gets its name from the fact that it's often in bloom over Easter

Running alongside Kew's Princess of Wales Conservatory is a path that links the Grass Garden to the Woodland Garden. There are great views looking down into the Rock Garden from here, but in March one of my favourite sights has to be the clusters of purple blooms sprouting from the ground near the path. These are pasque flowers and the form you can see here, *Pulsatilla vulgaris* subsp. *grandis*, is one of the most glorious of early spring blooms.

Most of the 30-plus species of *Pulsatilla* are found in Europe and temperate Asia, but their range extends as far east as Japan, and two species occur in North America. The common name of pasque flower comes from the French word *Pâques*, meaning Easter – the time of year when *P. vulgaris* blooms.

Pulsatilla vulgaris is the most commonly grown pasque flower in gardens and has a natural distribution

PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF EDEN



P. vulgaris varies in colour from dark purple to red (right), with yellow anthers



Its long taproot helps *P. vulgaris* survive drought, but makes it tricky to transplant



Dense hairs insulate *P. halleri* subsp. *halleri* so it can grow even in freezing temperatures

I know that spring is almost here when these soft, hairy buds first appear. Soon the velvety flowers open, revealing a central boss of yellow anthers

that stretches from western Europe to the Ukraine and as far north as parts of England and Sweden. The subspecies *grandis* only occurs in central and eastern Europe and has large flowers, up to 9 cm across, which appear before the foliage. The stems, leaves and backs of the petals are all covered with silvery, silky hairs.

The plants of *Pulsatilla vulgaris* subsp. *grandis* along the path above the Rock Garden have been at Kew for more than two decades. They came as seeds in 1985, collected in Switzerland and donated to Kew by the Botanic Garden of Basel University. Having been germinated and grown on in the Alpine Nursery, a batch was planted on the Rock Garden. Here the plants have thrived over the years, enjoying the sunny position and well-drained but never completely dry soil.

I know that spring is almost here when the soft, hairy buds of this plant appear.

Soon the velvety purple blooms open, revealing a central boss of yellow anthers. In the typical form, *Pulsatilla vulgaris* subsp. *vulgaris*, the flowers open later, usually in April, by which time the leaves are starting to unfurl.

The flowers of *Pulsatilla vulgaris* are normally purple, but other colours include white and shades of red. Along the same path is a fantastic colony of red-flowered forms that open in mid-April. These have self-seeded around, some even occupying cracks between the rocks. Here they get plenty of light, but their roots are protected from the summer sun.

Growing from seed is the most reliable way of establishing these plants. The seedheads develop soon after the flowers have faded and are an attractive feature in themselves. Each seed has a long, feathery tail and they form soft, hairy clusters on the end of each stem.

When the seed is ready, it's dispersed by the gentlest of breezes, so must be collected before it blows away. It should then be sown in a pot of loam-based compost and lightly covered. Fresh seed can germinate in a couple of months, but older seed will need a period of cold to break its dormancy. In this case, keep the pot in an unheated glasshouse or coldframe for the winter and the seeds should germinate by early spring.

Seedlings can be moved when young, but established plants don't like being disturbed. I have moved mature plants of *Pulsatilla vulgaris*, but with variable success. The secret is to dig up the plants with a good-sized rootball, after they've set seed. They have long, fleshy taproots, so dig deep to avoid breaking these. Plant them in their new position straight away and give them a good watering to settle them in.

Similar to *Pulsatilla vulgaris* is another European species, *P. halleri*. It differs in having more coarsely divided leaves and is even hairier, especially its buds, which are covered in dense, downy, white fur. Its first flowers open before its leaves too. From further east, in the Caucasus Mountains at the edge of Europe, comes violet-flowered *P. violacea*. **b**



P. vulgaris subsp. *grandis* creates a mound of colour in March or April

PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD WILFORD; HINA JOSHI; JEFF EDEN



A sunny, well-drained spot is a must for most pulsatillas, including *P. campanella*



Within the fluffy head, each seed is equipped with a feathery tail to help it fly on the wind



P. violacea hails from the high, grassy meadows of the Caucasus Mountains

The characters used to distinguish pulsatillas, such as hairiness and division of the foliage, can vary from plant to plant, with some showing features of more than one species. For example, *Pulsatilla vulgaris* subsp. *grandis* has been treated as a subspecies of *P. balleri* in the past. This variation has led to difficulties when trying to put pulsatillas in some sort of order and there is no recent study of the whole genus.

In North America they're sometimes classified as anemones and in Europe *Pulsatilla vulgaris* was named *Anemone pulsatilla* by Carl Linnaeus in the 18th century. Recent phylogenetic studies, which look at DNA to establish relationships, have suggested they should be included within the genus *Anemone*, but for now, at least, the name *Pulsatilla* is the one you're more likely to come across.

Some species flower later in spring and even into early summer. There's a wonderful patch of the central Asian *Pulsatilla campanella* at the southern end of the Rock Garden that blooms during late April and May. The nodding, bell-like flowers are pale purple and backed with silky hairs. Another 'nodding' species is the European

P. pratensis. Its narrow, almost tubular, bell-shaped flowers can be very dark violet-purple and face downwards when open.

Not all pulsatillas have petals in shades of purple, violet or red. *Pulsatilla alpina*, from the mountains of central Europe, has white or yellow bowl-shaped flowers, and *P. patens* subsp. *flavescens* has pale sulphur-yellow blooms. *P. patens* occurs in North America, but the yellow subspecies is only found in Siberia and Mongolia. The plants at Kew came from the Ural Mountains of Russia. The upward-facing blooms open wide, and appear from late April above a mound of fresh green leaves.

Apart from petal colour, the differences between the species of pasque flower aren't always clear to see. Look closely though and you begin to appreciate the subtle variety that exists in the genus. One thing that is consistent, however, is the beauty of the blooms, and I always look forward to their appearance each year. 🌱

Richard Wilford is manager of Kew's Hardy Display collections

Look out for Kew's Pulsatilla collection as the flowers begin to open from March onwards

There's a wonderful patch of the central Asian Pulsatilla campanella in the Rock Garden that blooms in late April and May



Like all pasque flowers, yellow *P. patens* subsp. *flavescens* belongs to the buttercup family



A rare wildflower in the UK, *P. vulgaris* is nevertheless thriving on Kew's Rock Garden