



Rock stars

With the welcome arrival of spring, Kew's Richard Wilford encourages you to come and see our amazing displays of alpine plants and early bulbs – the dazzling jewels of this vibrant season

Spring is in the air and our early-flowering plants are starting to stir, so it's the perfect time to explore the Davies Alpine House. No matter how many times you've wandered through this beautiful area of the Gardens, you're always in for a new visual treat. Every visit will reward you with stunning plants, intriguing vistas and plenty of photo opportunities.

Set within the undulating landscape of the Rock Garden, this unique glasshouse is home to plants from the world's mountains. Spring starts early here – protected from the worst of the weather, these plants have a head start. From February onwards you'll be truly dazzled by the colourful array of alpines and bulbs on display.

Alpine plants grow in mountainous regions all over the world and many are only found above the treeline – where temperatures are too cold and conditions too harsh for trees to develop a woody trunk. In this open, rocky environment, plants need to be able to cope with the harsh winds and intense sunlight that occur at high altitudes.

You may wonder, then, why such tough plants need to be grown in a glasshouse. In fact, they're not here to be kept warm – they're being kept dry

Photo: RBG Kew

Inside the glasshouse there's always something different to see...

over winter. In their mountain homes, these plants would often be covered by snow and all water would be frozen, so conditions would be dry. In a dull, wet British winter these plants can suffer.

Inside the glasshouse you'll find some of the rarest and most difficult-to-grow alpine gems. Many of the plants are in pots and are put on display when in flower, on benches at either end or plunged into the beds in the middle of the house. There's always something different to see. Look out for neat, delicate-looking cushion plants, such as *Dionysia* and *Androsace*, which have evolved to hug the ground or hang on to steep cliffs, and are covered in tiny blooms early in the year. Familiar alpine bulbs like snowdrops, crocuses and dwarf narcissi are joined by rare irises. Then later in spring you'll see gentians, saxifrages, tulips and the charming silver-edged primrose (*Primula marginata*).

The plants grown here are part of Kew's 'living collection', which is an invaluable resource for our scientific research. Plants may have their DNA sampled, for example, as part of studies into plant relationships and evolution, or chemical compounds may be extracted for research into possible medicinal uses. The diversity of our living collection is vital for our science, but is also what makes Kew so unique and beautiful.

Outside on the Rock Garden we grow plants that are more tolerant of our wet winters, but still need free-draining soil and a sunny position. They include alpines but also some Mediterranean species that need similar conditions. The Rock Garden begins to put on its spectacular show from March, and reaches a colourful crescendo in late April and early May.

As you stroll through the Rock Garden, look out for saxifrages clinging to rocky crevices, and alpine



phlox from North America, creating mats of bright pink or magenta flowers. Up on the high ledges, Mediterranean peonies will be flowering, including the smallest species, *Paeonia cambessedesii*, at only 40cm tall. A native of the Balearic Islands, it opens its bowl-shaped rose-pink blooms in March.

Dotted among the sandstone rocks are the rich purple, velvety blooms of pasque flowers (*Pulsatilla*), which are among the most beautiful of all rock garden plants. Beside the streams, which replicate meltwater gushing down a mountainside, are moisture lovers such as Japanese primulas (*Primula japonica*) and elegant Siberian irises (*Iris sibirica*).

Beyond the rocky outcrops, gullies and waterfalls you'll find another spring treat – our Woodland

Above: downy-leaved pasque flowers, such as *Pulsatilla halleri* var. *seguisiana*, thrive in the free-draining, gritty soil of the Rock Garden

Photos: Richard Wilford, Sarah Cuttle



Meet the experts and discover delightful daffodils

Come along in March and join a free tour to find out about these cheery heralds of spring

No flower is more synonymous with spring than the daffodil, and Kew grows many different types. That's why these iconic plants are the subject of our popular Meet the Experts tours, every Tuesday in March. So join us for a fascinating insight into how and why Kew grows daffodils. You'll get the chance to go behind the scenes into our labs and also see preserved herbarium specimens.

Find out more about this and other Meet the Experts tours this spring on p62. And see overleaf for details of our free daily Step into Spring tour.

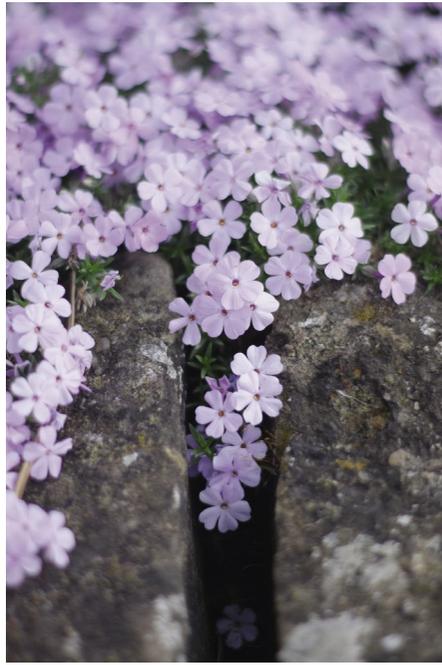
...and get crafty

If you're inspired by the beauty of Kew's daffodils, then why not learn how to make paper versions? In our new course on 14 March our tutor will guide you through the process of creating life-like paper daffodils, and you can take home your lovely everlasting posy for all to enjoy. Members get a £10 discount on the course price, so book your place now – see details on p63.



Above: the small, delicate flowers of the lady tulip (*Tulipa clusiana*) open wide to reveal a rich purple centre

Left: displays of beautiful alpines, including irises, daffodils and cyclamen, are changed weekly in the Davies Alpine House



Far left: mat-forming alpinines such as *Phlox douglasii* 'Rosea' create cascades of colour over the sandstone outcrops in the Rock Garden

Left: elegant dog's-tooth violets, such as *Erythronium tuolumnense*, rise above the blue scillas in the Woodland Garden

Garden. Under the oaks, acers and a huge black walnut, woodland plants make the most of the light and moisture before the tree leaves block out the sun. First to appear are the snowdrops, scattered through the beds and up the grassy mound towards the Temple of Aeolus.

In early March, the tiny purple blooms of *Crocus tommasinianus* open in the sun, soon joined by blue and white anemones and purple corydalis, to make a beautiful tapestry. Then a sea of blue scillas washes through the woodland, and wild daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) dance among the grass on the slopes of the mound.

Spring advances quickly now and as the scillas fade, dainty dog's-tooth violets take centre stage, including the British native *Erythronium dens-canis* and the North American 'White Beauty' and yellow *E. tuolumnense*. Towering above them will be crown imperials (*Fritillaria imperialis*) with their clusters of orange bells held on tall, straight stems, while fresh fern fronds unfurl around them.

Spring sometimes feels like a long time coming, but once it's here there's so much to see that it can be hard to keep up. Flowers come and go rapidly as the sun warms the soil, so do try to visit regularly to enjoy all this season has to offer. It's a glorious time at Kew.

Photos: Richard Wilford

Join our free Step into Spring tour to see more seasonal highlights – daily, 1 March–22 April, at 12 noon. For details of this and all our other spring events, see p62.



Get Kew's advice on bulbs

With some 30 years' experience of growing and writing about bulbs, Richard Wilford has shared his expert knowledge in the Kew book *Growing Garden Bulbs*. He explains how to choose the best bulbs for your garden and offers step-by-step instructions on planting, caring for and even propagating these beautiful plants.

Priced just £8, *Growing Garden Bulbs* is available now in Kew's shops and at kew.org/shop – don't forget to claim your members' ten per cent discount.