

## Bleeding Heart

### History

The classic perennial *Dicentra*, more commonly known as the bleeding heart, has been gracing gardens for over a century. The bleeding heart was brought to North America by Robert Fortune in the late 1850s from Japan.

### Description

Bleeding hearts are unusual and attractive plants. They grow in a small mound reaching about only 2 to 3 feet tall. The foliage is fernlike, with a light- to medium-green colour.

The flowers are the main attraction of the plant. They bloom from arching stems out of the top of the foliage. Each flower is about an inch in diameter and has the shape of a heart with a small blood drop at the bottom. The main colours of the flowers are pink, red and white.

### Planting

The bleeding heart should be planted in an area that has partial shade. This plant requires a moist, well-drained, fertile soil. When planting in the ground, make sure that the area is clear of all roots and plants, so the plants will not have to compete for moisture and nutrients.

Bleeding hearts should be spaced anywhere from 2 to 3 feet apart to ensure maximum growth. While the plant is blooming, make sure to keep it fully moist to lengthen the flowering period.

### Care

The bleeding heart has no serious pest or disease problems; however, your plants might get a small aphid infestation. Having organic matter in the soil will supply all the protection the roots need for the plant to stay healthy and strong.

If the soil conditions are poor, then stem rot might occur. To correct this problem, transplant the plants into clean, fresh soil.

Bleeding hearts tend to last for many years, so dividing the plants every three or four years is beneficial to prevent over-crowding. In the early spring, the plants can be dug up, but be sure to handle the roots with extreme care because they are very brittle and easily damaged.

### Caution

All parts of the bleeding heart plant are poisonous. The alkaloid toxins in the plant are extremely harmful if ingested. Also, people with sensitive skin might develop strong irritation if in contact with the plant.

Knowing this, you should always wear gloves when handling any part of the plant; also, little children should be watched and kept away from this plant at all times. Symptoms resulting from contact with the toxins include trembling and agitation, followed by vomiting, diarrhea, convulsions, and impaired breathing.

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