

Plants for Knowing the Spring Courtyard

by Riz Reyes



Within a classic Chinese garden, iconic plants are usually an accent or accessory, as water and rock dominate the landscape. In a Sichuan-style garden, the use of plants is far more deliberate and diverse. Mass plantings of a single species are common and native flora predominate whenever possible. Through my nursery, Landwave Gardens, I have been raising plants destined for the Seattle Chinese Garden, including about 30 different herbaceous perennials and a handful of woody species I collected during my time in China (2004–2005) or obtained from other nurseries that carry specific species commonly used in this style of garden. The plant material for the Seattle Chinese Garden must be authentic, because it will be the only Sichuan-style garden outside China. Highlighted below are a few selections to look out for when Knowing the Spring Courtyard opens.

Hemerocallis citrina 黄花菜

H. citrina is a common daylily found throughout many regions of China. Its buds are often eaten as a vegetable and included in many authentic Chinese dishes. In the landscape, however, this night-blooming daylily, known for its remarkably sweet scent come nightfall, is as tough as any hybrid daylily on the market. It is also far more delicate in appearance, with deep yellow, open trumpets sounding the arrival of spring when its wiry stalks emerge from the ground for mid-summer blooms.

Epimedium species 淫羊藿

Sichuan is home to many species of this garden-worthy perennial. *Epimedium* is a prized herb and its roots are used in traditional Chinese medicine. In the spring garden, its uniquely delicate, spider-like flowers burst into full bloom atop lush, often evergreen foliage. Visitors to the Seattle Chinese Garden will see the diversity of this genus and appreciate them even more.

Cardiocrinum giganteum 大百合

The famed giant Himalayan lily is commonly found in the deep, forested valleys of western Sichuan. Locals sometimes collect bulbs to grow in containers close to their homes so they can enjoy their statuesque blooms and seductive scent detectable from several hundred feet away. *Cardiocrinum* grows under the tall canopies of mixed deciduous trees. They can take more than seven years

to flower when grown from seed, and once they flower, the original bulb dies. It is certainly well worth the wait and quite an occasion when this lily finally sends up a stem!



Iris japonica 蝴蝶花

This evergreen iris is a sight to behold come April when the famed “butterfly flower” bursts into bloom. Commonly found on moist, rocky slopes in the wild, its strap-like foliage spills over cliffs, creating a dramatic effect year-round. It is a popular groundcover throughout Sichuan because it is adaptable and spreads easily. It also withstands dry shade once established (does well under conifers). A mass planting of this iris exemplifies the spring season like no other flowering plant.



Mahonia species 十大功劳

An assortment of Chinese mahonias will grace the grounds of the Knowing the Spring Courtyard. Evergreen foliage will provide year-round structural and textural interest, as will remarkable attributes such as the fine foliage texture of *M. eurybracteata* (left) the glaucous white undersides and deep pink flowers of *M. gracilipes*, and the boldness of *M. japonica* with its thick leather-like leaves and bright yellow, scented flowers.

Corydalis temulifolia 紫堇

A fairly new species to cultivation, this false bleeding heart has exquisite bronze foliage when it appears in late winter. In spring, tadpole-like pale purple flowers top succulent stems that rise up almost two feet from plants that are nearly three feet wide. I found this species growing on a mountain called Qing Cheng Shan, just outside of the Sichuan capital of Chengdu. I was struck by its size as most *Corydalis* in cultivation are delicate ephemerals just a few inches tall and seem to come and go and then come back again, but this species holds up as long as it gets adequate water and ample shade.

This list doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of flora in the wilds of Sichuan, considered the “mother of gardens,” but I hope sparks interest in the diverse and unusual species planned for the Seattle Chinese Garden. It is truly an honor to contribute to the Garden and share these wonderful discoveries from China with avid gardeners and visitors who might not be able to see these plants in the wild in their native habits.

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