

# Epimediums

By Jessamyn Tuttle  
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## A wonderful and versatile shade plant

Any garden has its problem spots, but dry shade can be one of the most difficult. Especially with all the evergreen trees and shrubs that grow so well here in the Pacific Northwest, we end up with tricky sites under the tree canopy and among the roots. What to plant? How about *epimediums*? These unassuming plants offer decorative flowers and foliage, are drought-tolerant and deer-resistant, and should be more widely known.

Many gardeners are unfamiliar with *epimediums*, although you might have heard them referred to by common names like bishop's hat, fairy wings, or barrenwort. Used as an herbal supplement in Chinese medicine, it's typically called horny goat weed. All of these names refer to *epimediums* in general, although there are 54 known species, with new discoveries and crosses appearing all the time, with commercially available offerings expanding hugely in the last 20-30 years.

In the same family as barberry and *mahonia*, *epimediums* are native to the Mediterranean and East Asia, but their preference for wet winters and dry summers makes them a perfect fit for our climate. Mediterranean varieties tend to be the most drought tolerant, while the Chinese and Japanese species often have showier flowers, but both have plenty to offer.

While *epimedium* flowers are not large, they bloom in profusion in spring and come in a range of colors including true pink, red, orange, bright yellow, white, and purple. Flower stalks form during the winter and gradually rise up through the first flush of leaves in April, producing tiny elaborate blooms, often adorned with ruffles or spurs (and sometimes resembling tiny UFOs), on wiry stems that seem to dance above the foliage. They tend to grow between 8-12" high, but some enthusiastic varieties might make it to two feet, with the flower stalks extending beyond that.

The leaves can also be extremely decorative. *Epimediums* can be evergreen, semi-evergreen, or deciduous, so some varieties will hold up beautifully through even a hard winter while others disappear completely, making a perfect overplanting for early bulbs. Some varieties have solid green leaves, some have leaves that start out bronze or purple then fade to green, and others have a lovely red rim to their delicate green heart shaped leaves, or purple mottling. Some are very stiff, glossy and spiked like a *mahonia* or holly. With all leaf types, it's recommended to cut back the previous year's leaves before the new growth starts in early spring, so the flowers will show to full advantage.



*Epimedium x versicolor* Cherry Tart. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners

*Epimediums* are known primarily as shade plants, but most varieties will enjoy morning sun. If you want to put them somewhere very sunny or very shady, check the variety as some are more tolerant. A wide range of moisture is acceptable but good drainage is absolutely required. While most *epimediums* will be happiest with regular water, it's their ability to cope with severely dry soil that endears them to many, especially growing among the roots of trees. *Epimediums* grow from rhizomes just below the surface, creating an effective groundcover and weed barrier. Most grow as slowly expanding clumps but others will spread politely.

*E. grandiflorum* is from Japan and is one of the showiest species, with large flowers and a vast range of colors. "Bandit" is a particularly lovely one, with pure white spurred flowers above a mound of dark green leaves rimmed in deep red.

*E. x versicolor*, a hybrid of *grandiflorum* and *pinnatum*, is showy and drought tolerant, with many different cultivars available. "Sulphureum" is a fantastic plant, putting up sturdy flower stalks even through late snow and ice to produce a bright display of yellow flowers amongst red-flushed leaves, which turn dark bronze in the fall but remain clean and fresh looking into the following winter. "Cherry Tart" has gorgeous pink flowers and reddish-purple foliage, while "Cupreum" has a similar flower but in a paler apricot color.



**Left:** Epimedium Amber Queen flower stems. **Right:** Epimedium Amber Queen up close. *Photos by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Hybrid *epimedium* “Amber Queen” is a newer introduction and is a star in the garden, growing to be large and vigorous with mottled new leaves, usually evergreen, and large flowers of bright apricot tinged with red, with beautiful spurs.

*E. sempervirens* can be evergreen to semi-evergreen. "Cherry Hearts" has heavily spurred white flowers and cherry-red new leaves that change to green with a red edge, while "Secret Arrow" leaves turn brilliant red-orange in the autumn with lime green veining.

*E. stellulatum* is a lovely, sturdy evergreen plant with impressive sprays of small flowers forming an airy display above the leaves.

*E. x youngianum*, a cross of *grandiflorum* and *diphyllum*, has wonderful floral displays and is excellent for very dry spots between tree roots. There are many cultivars, but "Purple Heart" unfurls greenish-purple leaves that deepen to dark purple, creating a fabulous backdrop for delicate lavender flowers.

Most *epimediums* flower in April, about the same time as tulips, although some like *E. rhizomatosum*, a low spreading groundcover variety, bloom later in May and continue throwing flowers into the summer.

*Epimediums* can be found at specialty nurseries, and several of these varieties will be available for sale (along with many other wonderful garden plants) at the Master Gardener Plant Fair the day before Mother’s Day. Get hooked now and you’ll be looking to add more to your collection next spring!

### **Resources:**

- “Plant Evaluation Notes: An Evaluation Report on barrenworts for the shade garden.” 2003. Chicago Botanic Garden. Mark R. Rudy.  
[https://www.chicagobotanic.org/downloads/planteval\\_notes/no20\\_barrenworts.pdf](https://www.chicagobotanic.org/downloads/planteval_notes/no20_barrenworts.pdf)
- “Epimediums: queens of the woodland.” April 2008. Pacific Horticulture. Richie Steffen.  
<https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/epimediums-queens-of-the-woodland/>



**Left:** *Epimedium sempervirens* Cherry Heart has colorful leaves and delicate flowers. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

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