

## PLANT IN THE SPOTLIGHT

# *Dodecatheon clevelandii*: A Wild Cyclamen from California

by Carol Bornstein

SINCE LEAVING Michigan almost 30 years ago, I have made the acquaintance of many fine California native plants. My list of favorites keeps changing, but Cleveland's shooting star (*Dodecatheon clevelandii*) is always among them.

### SHOOTING STARS

California is home to eight of the dozen or so species in the genus *Dodecatheon*, which is predominantly native to western North America. The lone representative of the eastern United States is eastern shooting star (*D. meadia*).

The genus possesses a list of evocative common names: American cowslip, rooster combs, bird-bills, mosquito-bills, mad violets, sailor caps, prairie pointers, and wild cyclamen. The last is particularly apt, because cyclamen are the Asian and European relatives of *Dodecatheon*.

In California, shooting stars comprise two basic categories: high-elevation species that bloom in late spring or summer and occur in moist habitats, and lowland species that bloom in late winter or spring and grow in the winter-wet, summer-dry Mediterranean climate regions of the state. They share easily recognizable flowers, whose slightly askew, reflexed petals are indeed reminiscent of cyclamen. Borne in loose umbels, the nodding white to magenta flowers seem to dance atop leafless stalks, stealing the show from the rather plain basal foliage.

Cleveland's shooting star (*D. clevelandii*, USDA Zones 6–9, AHS Zones 9–5) is one of the most appealing members of the genus. Found throughout much of California's Mediterranean core, this clove-scented perennial grows wild on grassy slopes and flats in chaparral, foothill woodland, and valley grassland communities from central California south into Baja California, Mexico. The most commonly cultivated form, *D. clevelandii* ssp. *insulare*, is found in southern California and the offshore Channel Islands.



*Dodecatheon clevelandii*

Emerging in fall, shortly after the rainy season begins, the plant's light green, somewhat succulent leaves signal the end of its summer dormancy period.


Soon thereafter, the flower stalk elongates, reaching eight to 16 inches tall. Once the buds open, the upswept petals of lilac, rose, magenta, or white appear poised for flight. Later, the ripening seeds

within the tan seed capsules rattle in the slightest breeze.

### GROWING REQUIREMENTS

Although widespread in nature, Cleveland's shooting star isn't as easy to find in commerce. Yet gardeners who successfully track down seeds or plants will be amply rewarded if they follow a few simple guidelines. Place them in a sunny or partly shaded location and keep them well-watered from autumn through spring. Then allow them to dry out completely in summer, otherwise their delicate, fleshy roots will rot. The succulent leaves and roots attract snails, slugs, and gophers, so protect the plants from these pests. Seeds germinate fairly easily and plants reach flowering size in about three years.

There are many ways to appreciate shooting stars in the garden. Growing them in containers is the most reliable method, whether nestled into established plantings while in flower and whisked away as the foliage yellows, or combined with other compatible plants in a trough garden. Rock gardeners can tuck a few among bulbs, succulents, and other diminutive companions.

For a captivating effect, plant drifts in a grassy meadow or beneath the dappled shade of trees or tall shrubs such as redbuds or manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos* spp.). Be sure to retain the showy, dried inflorescences long enough to release the next generation of shooting star seeds. 

### Sources

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Richmond, CA. (888) 266-4370.  
[www.anniesannuals.com](http://www.anniesannuals.com).

**Theodore Payne Foundation**,  
Sun Valley, CA. (818) 768-1802.  
[www.theodorepayne.org](http://www.theodorepayne.org). Seeds by  
mail-order; plants onsite only.

**Yerba Buena Nursery**, Woodside, CA.  
(650) 851-1668. [www.yerbabuena  
nursery.com](http://www.yerbabuena<br/>nursery.com). (No mail-order.)

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