

THE STORY OF PLANTS: PULMONARIAS

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GARDENERS, LIKE DOCTORS, often get trapped at parties by people with a thousand worrisome questions. They'll ask you about a plant in their garden with yellowing leaves, or bugs. Then they'll brag about their tomato harvest or reminisce about their mother's rose garden, how meaningful it was to her. I'm all for finding meaning in your life through plants, but not necessarily roses. The conversation invariably leads to the question: "What is your favorite plant?" After all, gardeners always have favorite plants, collect them to a distraction, and become mini-experts on them telling you how and why to grow them *ad nauseum*.

I have many favorite plants—willows and aloes, cabbages and conifers—yet I am hard pressed to choose my favorite. So I have a spring-loaded response to the question: lungwort. Usually this releases me from my party trap, and I'm free to go freshen my drink, or wander past the hors d'oeuvre table again.

Lungworts, better known as pulmonarias, are truly one of my favorite plants, so I am not lying, and let me tell you why. They're workhorses. And there is one among the over 150 forms and cultivars that has put lungworts on my favorites list: *Pulmonaria saccharata* 'Margery Fish'.

I planted it 10 years ago in a client's garden. Though many plants have come and gone, 'Margery Fish' has stayed put growing in volume and beauty. Its mildew resistance, heavily spotted leaves, and early bloom time earned it the RHS Award of Garden Merit in 1993.



Pulmonaria 'Margery Fish' (Daniel Mount)

I planted it with wine-colored heliobores which pick up the intermediary mauve as the pink buds open becoming blue flowers. This changing flower color, one of the charms of pulmonarias, actually has a function. The pH of the flower changes as nectar develops. The final blue signals bees that dinner is ready.

Not all of the 14 or so species in this complicated genus have this trait. One can find solid blue flowers, solid pink flowers, blue buds that turn pink, and pure white flowers. Plant breeders revel in this variability and the genus's ability to form interspecific hybrids.

Pulmonaria cultivation began with *Pulmonaria officinalis* in the sixteenth century. Grown in medicinal herb gardens it was thought to cure lung problems, thus the names *lungwort* and

pulmonaria from the Latin word for lung, *pulmo*. In the eighteenth century lungworts entered the ornamental garden. The first one in the U.S. was planted in Bartram's garden in 1728. Breeding in earnest didn't start until the late twentieth century and much of that as recently as the 1990s.

Since 'Margery Fish' I have planted many other cultivars in my gardens. 'Benediction' with its vivid blue flowers and narrow sparsely spotted foliage tops my list of favorites.

P. rubra 'Redstart' with its early dainty coral flowers renews her spell over me each spring, though I find I gravitate more toward the pure blue cultivars

like the stunner 'Trevi Fountain'. I think this year I may even add a pure white cultivar to my collection.

Oh no, did I say collection?

Where will it go with all the other members of the Boraginaceae getting room in my garden: the alkanets (*Anchusa*), the bluebells (*Mertensia*), the navelworts (*Omphalodes*) and the brunneras (*Brunnera*)? The weedy forget-me-nots (*Myosotis*), borage (*Borago*) and white comfrey (*Symphytum orientale*) finding footing in my garden show that my favoritism graces not only the pulmonarias but the whole borage family.

Now you'll never have to ask me what my favorite plant family is.

Just ask me if my drink needs freshening. ☘

Read more of Daniel's reflections on plants and gardens at www.mountgardens.com.