

March 2009

Plants of the Month

Croton

Codiaeum variegatum pictum

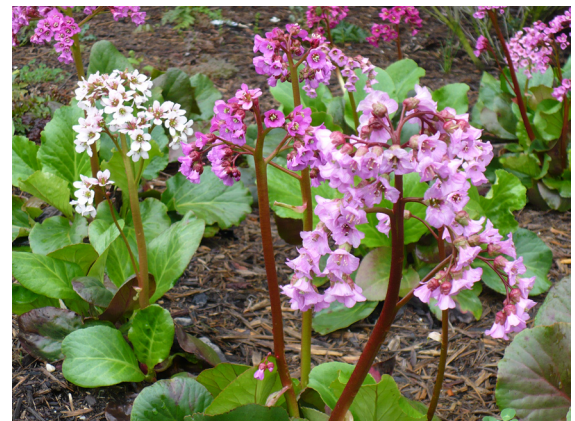
Give this houseplant the three things it loves, and it will be your new best friend. A tropical shrub with fiery foliage that adds pizzazz year-round, croton wants bright light and lots of it. Place in the sunniest location you can—at least 2-3 hours of direct sunlight daily. Try to replicate tropical humidity by misting or placing its pot on pebbles in a tray of water. Thirdly, keep it warm. Room temperature will do, but avoid cold drafts. Fertilize moderately spring to fall. Croton grows to 3-4 feet. If it gets too rambunctious, prune it back.



Leather Bergenia, Pigsqueak

Bergenia crassifolia

A Siberian homeland explains why this perennial keeps its leaves all winter. The rosette of 10" glossy leaves turn a pleasing purple when temperatures fall. Combine that with its early spring flowers in shades of rosy pink rising a foot above foliage, and a bed of bergenia has much to recommend it. Bergenia's one drawback is that once winter hits hard, it looks pummeled. Plant in part shade—morning sun is best—and moist soil with good drainage. Then entertain kids and friends by rubbing a leaf between your fingers to make it squeak like a pig.



Star Magnolia

Magnolia stellata

The earliest magnolia to bloom, star magnolia has petals in white to pale pink and uniquely shaped—but tender. Avoid planting in a southern exposure which pushes the blooms to open too early and get nipped by frost. Otherwise, this lushly full, 15-20 foot tree is virtually carefree. After its fuzzy buds finish flowering, sturdy leaves emerge dark green with a lighter underside and remain virtually pest and disease free. It prefers rich, moist, well-drained soil in full or part shade. Plant in front of evergreens or a brick wall to makes the blooms really stand out. Fall color is gold to bronze.



Onions—common, red, white, yellow

Allium cepa

Plant your onion sets (young bulbs) or transplants from March 20 to May 1. Cool weather is needed for leaf growth and warmer weather for bulb enlargement. Space 1-6" apart. Thin out dense plantings by eating young "spring onions". Spring onions will grow with only 5 hours of sun daily, but to get big mature bulbs provide full sun. Work fertilizer into soil before planting, and fertilize again 1-2 weeks after bulbs enlarge. Let bulbs show above soil. In 85-120 days, harvest mature bulbs when 2/3rds of dry tops have fallen over. Long-day and intermediate types are best for the Mid-Atlantic.



Have a pest or gardening question?

Call The Home and Garden Information Center

1-800-342-2507

www.hgic.umd.edu