

|| PLANT PORTRAIT ||

Undemanding and understated, meadow-rues can easily grace any garden. BY PATRICK LIMA



THE HEIGHT OF ELEGANCE

GARDEN PLANTS, LIKE PEOPLE, have their share of bad habits and weak points. Some perennials in particular can be invasive or floppy, fussy about food, untidy as they age or prone to ailments. A few foibles can be overlooked (or overcome), but even the most indulgent gardener will sometimes decide to give a troublesome plant the heave-ho in favour of something finer. The perfect plant is a rare breed indeed, but as a group, meadow-rues (*Thalictrum* spp. and cvs.) come close. Lovely of leaf, delicate in their flowering, these elegant plants combine graceful growth habits with a sturdy constitution.

The various species and cultivars of meadow-rue bloom from mid-May to August.

CRAVING NO MORE garden space than you allot, they make few demands on a gardener's time and energy. Several may need a few bamboo stakes to keep them upright, but then again, one of them may be the tallest perennial in the garden. Grown well—and it's not hard to accomplish—meadow-rues lend their understated presence to any garden not entirely windswept, starved of nutrients or parched. Thriving in sun where the soil is reasonably fertile and holds some moisture, they are completely at home in flickering shade, where the various species and cultivars follow each other in bloom from mid-May to August.

FINE FOLIAGE

Just as important as the flowers are their leaves. Out of bloom, meadow-rues maintain a show of foliage as fine as any in the garden; indeed, according to Louise Wilder, writing about *Thalictrum* in the 1930s, their foliage is “uniformly beautiful” and “their chief fortune.” Subtle in colour, mead-



Below left:
Thalictrum aquilegifolium 'Album'

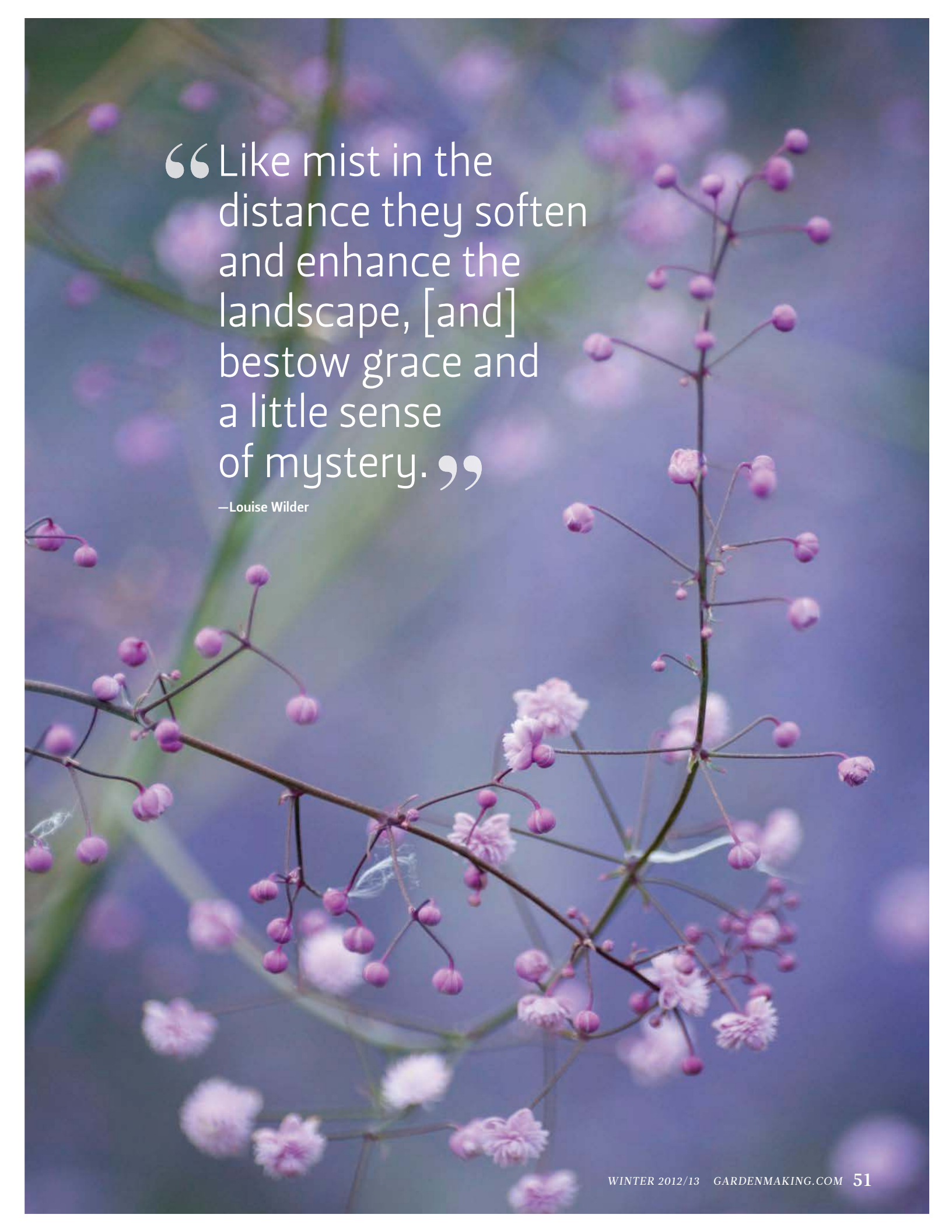
Below right: foliage of *T. flavum* ssp. *glaucum*

Opposite page:
T. delavayi 'Hewitt's Double'

ow-rues may be overlooked in favour of the more dramatic or bold, but, as Wilder says, “Like mist in the distance they soften and enhance the landscape, [and] bestow grace and a little sense of mystery.” The more I and my partner grow these elegant perennials, the more we appreciate their refined ways and gentle shades.

At least four species of *Thalictrum* are native to Canada. Seldom abundant, their cut leaves and small fluffy flowers are easy enough to spot in woods, damp thickets and—of course—meadows. Around the globe, upward of 120 species grow wild from the Arctic, through Europe, across the Himalayas into China and Japan, and over to North America. Since most are inconspicuous in flower, only a handful shows up in gardens.





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—Louise Wilder

SPRING THROUGH SUMMER BLOOMERS

Earliest to bloom, from mid-May to early June (or tulip time in our Zone 4b garden), is 'Thundercloud' (*T. aquilegifolium* 'Thundercloud'). At a height of 24 to 30 inches (60 to 75 cm), it's also the shortest. As with several other meadow-rues, its so-called flowers are really tufts of stamens, dark purplish red in this case. Massed above foliage resembling a bluish-green maidenhair fern, they give a soft misty effect characteristic of meadow-rues. This is a plant for a damp but drained corner of a sunny rock garden or bed, or the front line of a lightly shaded border. In sun, a group of late tulips could rise behind, while in shade, there could be lungworts, hellebores or Japanese primroses (*Primula japonica*) for company. Best in a group of three or more, this scaled-down meadow-rue is easy to increase by division just as growth resumes in spring.

Next comes the species *T. aquilegifolium*, the greater or columbine meadow-rue—the first we grew and a plant we call rosy meadow-rue. Its last name refers to foliage like that of columbine (*Aquilegia* spp.), and out of bloom, you're hard pressed to tell the difference. At peony times, puffy clouds of rosy mauve or greyish lilac hang in the air above wiry branches from three to four feet (90 to 120 cm) tall.

This is a grand, easy perennial for various sites: in the middle of a sunny bed with a peony nearby, and a foreground of 'Album' bloody cranesbill

(*Geranium sanguineum* 'Album') or striped bloody cranesbill (*G. s. var. striatum*), white or pale pink; in the back row next to tall creamy goat's beard (*Aruncus dioicus*); or set in front of shrubs with coppery purple leaves, such as the purple smokebush (*Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple') or red-leaved rose (*Rosa rubrifolia*), or in the vicinity of rugosa roses.

Columbine meadow-rue does have one bad habit: its flowers are followed by tan seedheads that shatter, scatter and sprout into many small plants that soon get big. To prevent seeding, trim

stems back to the fanning leaves once the flowers are over. The new cultivar 'Black Stockings' shows very dark, blackish-purple stems, and the ivory-white version is pretty partnered with pink or crimson peonies.

The foliage of most meadow-rues is cut on a pattern somewhere between columbine and maidenhair fern. Change the typical light green to silvery grey and you have glaucous-leaved yellow meadow-rue (*T. flavum* ssp. *glaucum* syn. *T. speciosissimum*), a five-foot (1.5-m)-tall species valued as much for its leaves as its hazy heads of soft lemon yellow—all stamens, no petals. Thriving in ordinary soil in sun or light shade, it makes a fine contrast with lavender-blue catmints, lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), light blue milky bellflower (*Campanula lactiflora*) or delphiniums of any hue. This meadow-rue should be positioned where its leaves can be seen even after the spent flower stalks are cut back. Let a deep violet clematis climb through for the contrast of light and dark flowers.





Opposite page: a mixed border with meadow-rue, feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*) and peonies.

Above, left to right: July-blooming *Thalictrum delavayi*; soft yellow *T. flavum* ssp. *glaucum*.

MEADOW-RUE FROM SEED

Buying young plants in spring is the simplest way to add a meadow-rue or two to your garden. But you don't always find them. Seeds offer the patient and adventurous gardener another route.

Chill seeds in their packet in the fridge for three weeks prior to sowing. Then sow any time from April to July in a six-inch (15-cm) pot filled with an

all-purpose soil mix, either your own or store-bought, just barely covering them with a dusting of soil. Keep pots in a shaded spot, at a temperature of 15 to 21°C, and water as needed.

Once germination takes place (from one to three months), shift pots into sun. When seedlings are large enough to handle, transplant individually to four-inch

(10-cm) pots and grow on until they look like the kind of hefty young plants you'd normally pick from a nursery bench. At that stage, set them out in the garden in their permanent place in prepped soil.

Seed sown in spring may flower the same season, while a midsummer seeding produces plants that winter over and bloom the following year—and the next.

TRIO OF TALL BEAUTIES

By late July, *T. delavayi*—the Chinese meadow-rue, sometimes incorrectly listed as *T. diptercarpum*—starts to show not the usual fluffy mass of stamens, but small flowers composed of four or five lilac sepals backing a tuft of creamy stamens. Held on spreading, interlaced branches, the hundreds of blooms create what the English garden writer Graham Thomas called “a great pyramidal airy-fairy display.” Because the plant reaches seven feet (2 m), you usually look up to see the down-facing flowers floating against the sky. We never stake this strong-stemmed perennial, but a few sticks and twine might be needed



Tall *Thalictrum* 'Elin'

in windy places to keep the flowers airborne. Given a choice of just one meadow-rue, this might be it. But it would be a toss-up with the slightly later cultivar *T. d.* 'Hewitt's Double', its tiny, perfectly round flowers strung like beads along thin stems, giving the impression of a tall lilac-coloured baby's breath, showy and ethereal at the same time. Like other meadow-rues, 'Hewitt's Double' sprouts very late in spring, so mark the spot, be patient and don't dig around looking for growth, or (speaking from experience) you'll snap emerging new shoots. Similar to the Chinese meadow-rue in height and flower form is *T. rochebruneanum*, a showy species with strong stems that seldom need a prop.

Look up, way up. Next in the meadow-rue parade is *T.* 'Elin', a veritable stilt-walker. It's the tallest perennial we grow, and tops out at more than 10 feet (3 m) and still manages to give a light, airy impression. Purple-tinted stems hold small, pale mauve buds that open to reveal greenish-white stamens, giving an overall effect of a creamy cloud. The subtle colour shows best against the dark backdrop of a hedge or shrubs—otherwise it's sky behind. Where breezes blow unblocked, several very long bamboo canes and a couple of levels of twine will help steady this long-legged plant that could tower behind phlox, Shasta daisies, tall lilies or daylilies of any colour. [▶](#)

FOR SOURCES, SEE PAGE 78.

RIGHT SOIL AND SITE

Meadow-rues aren't fussy about soil, except that they don't care to be bone-dry for extended periods; nor do they want to be bogged down with water. Damp but drained says it all.

Best is loamy earth liberally enriched with decayed organic matter in the form of compost or thoroughly decayed leaves,

along with composted manure and some peat or coir (shredded coconut husk that holds water like peat moss but lasts several years longer in the soil). In times of drought, a deep drink every week or 10 days should suffice—provided you've done some soil prep at the start. A mulch of any organic material, from compost to

grass clippings, helps hold moisture.

Light flickering shade is meadow-rue's idea of perfect exposure, but we have them in full sun as well as on the north side of—well, practically underneath—an expansive lilac bush, where the easygoing, rosy meadow-rue has naturalized itself from seed.