Growing Dicentra (Bleeding Heart)

**Latin Name Pronunciation:** dye-sen'-truh

These delicate-looking plants are actually sturdy and trouble-free additions to the perennial border or woodland garden. An old-fashioned beauty, *Dicentra spectabilis* bears arching stems of pendant, puffy heart-shaped blooms in pink or white and can grow to three feet tall and as wide where happy. The longer-blooming, shorter forms boast attractive green to blue-green foliage that is lovely in the garden from spring to fall. Both types make excellent cut flowers.

**Planting:** Potted Dicentra should be planted with the crown at soil level. Bareroot *Dicentra spectabilis* should be planted with the crown 2” below the soil line, but the crown of smaller bareroot varieties should be 1” below the soil line.

**Light/Watering:** Bleeding Heart thrives in partial to full shade, although flowering is best with morning sun and afternoon shade. Consistent watering is best for all; *D. spectabilis* will go dormant during dry conditions in summer.

**Fertilizer/Soil and pH:** These plants are at their best in evenly moist, rich soil in partial to full shade. A two-inch layer of mulch will help buffer soil moisture and keep the ground cooler. A slightly acidic soil (pH 6.0 to 6.5) is ideal, but plants will tolerate a pH up to 7.5. Apply compost or a general purpose, granular fertilizer in spring.

**Pests/Diseases:** Dicentra is occasionally bothered by slugs and snails, but this is rarely a serious problem. If grown in poorly drained, wet soil, the crowns of the plants may rot. Avoid these soils and allow good air circulation. Keep mulch several inches away from the base of the plants.

**Companions:** Dicentra is lovely with other denizens of light shade such as Aquilegia, Ferns, Tiarella, Campanula, Alchemilla, *Phlox divaricata*, and Pulmonaria, and truly enlivens woodland gardens. Plant *D. spectabilis* with Hosta or spreading perennial Geraniums, or fill in with annuals when this plant goes dormant in summer.

**Reflowering:** The smaller varieties of Dicentra will bloom right up until frost in temperate climates, especially if old flower stems are removed. In areas with very hot summers, flowering may stop but will resume with cooler weather. Regular removal of yellowing foliage will keep plants looking fresh.

**Dividing/Transplanting:** If desired, plants can be gingerly divided in early spring; gently separate the brittle roots, replanting vigorous pieces from the outer edge of the plant.

**End-of-Season Care:** Remove dead foliage after a killing frost in autumn, or anytime it becomes unattractive. A light mulch after the ground freezes will protect from winter heaving.

**Calendar of Care**

**Early Spring:** Apply a light application of balanced or slow-release fertilizer or side-dress with compost and organic amendments when new growth appears. Water well if it is unseasonably dry, as plants prefer evenly moist soil. Divide or transplant if needed as soon as you see new growth.
Mid-Spring: Watch for snail or slug damage and treat accordingly with baits or by handpicking. Apply a two-inch organic mulch as soon as soil warms, keeping the material away from the crowns of the plants.

Late Spring: Water regularly if the season is dry.

Summer: Plant summer annuals to fill in gaps where *Dicentra spectabilis* has gone dormant. Groom plants to keep them attractive by removing yellowing leaves and old flower stems.

Fall: Cut foliage back to soil level, and apply a winter mulch after the ground freezes.