



## Native Phlox Colors Spring Landscape

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Spring dazzles us with a cacophony of colors - bright gold forsythias, vivid red tulips, and coral quince. Sometimes a more pastel palette is in order and two native species ground phlox fit the bill. Both can be used as front of the border plants as well as groundcovers. They are attractive to several species of pollinators and I've occasionally seen hummingbirds seek out their flowers.

Most common are moss pinks (*Phlox subulata*) also referred to as creeping phlox. This is a tough, easy to care for perennial reaching to about 6 inches in height. Right now, it is covered with dozens to hundreds of blooms, depending on the size of your plant. Flowers can be white, pink, lavender-blue, or even bright magenta. The common name, phlox, is derived from a Greek word meaning flame and rightly so, as some species or cultivars of phlox are quite vivid.

This plant is often called moss pinks because of the shape of their leaves. They are needle or awl-like and from a distance resemble moss. This plant is indigenous to the eastern U.S. from Michigan and New York and down through the Appalachians from Pennsylvania to Georgia. It is hardy from USDA zones 3 to 9.



Creeping phlox. Photo by Chace Pettinelli, 2022

A most wonderful characteristic of creeping phlox is that it tolerates a pretty wide range of

conditions. As long as it is in mostly full sun and planted in a well-drained soil, it tolerates both slightly acidic as well as alkaline soils, sandy as well as clayey conditions, and is not appealing to deer.

Creeping phlox forms a fairly dense mat. Rarely do I find weeds able to penetrate its cover. Once established, creeping phlox only needs supplemental watering during long drought periods. Some gardeners like to trim it back by a third or so after blooming but I have never done so and it grows just fine. Plants get fertilized once a year in early spring.

This is a great plant for edging, rock gardens, perennial borders, sloping areas to prevent erosion and along pathways or wherever you need some spring color. It is particularly nice to pair with candytuft, early old-fashioned yellow irises and late species tulips. It is also quite attractive cascading over walls.

Flowers of both the creeping phlox and a second native species, woodland phlox (*P. divaricata*) have 5 pointed, notched petals. While creeping phlox may dazzle or even overwhelm spectators with large floriferous carpets of blooms, woodland phlox dances in more natural, partly shaded conditions. It's native range is in forests and fields along the eastern parts of the U.S.

Plants are a bit taller, reaching to 12 inches or more; flowers are held in loose clusters and flowers are a bit larger, reaching up to an inch in diameter. Colors are more limited in mainly just lilac to blue and white. 'Fuller's White' is my favorite and spreads slowly but surely by basal runners. Woodland phlox seems to be particularly attractive to swallowtail and gray hairstreak butterflies. It has a soft scent that you have to get on your knees to appreciate.

After blooming is over, the blossom stems can be cut back and the plant holds an attractive mound of green foliage through the rest of the growing season. Although it is reputed to self-sow, I have not found any seedlings, most likely as I cut it back after blooming. It is easy to share this precocious plant through divisions.

This is really a perfect plant for woodland or more naturalized gardens. While woodland phlox tolerates droughty conditions and heat, it really prospers in part shaded and moister, more woodland conditions. Let this plant naturalize. Pair this plant with columbine (especially the native), coral bells and carex cultivars. Like moss pinks, woodland phlox tolerates slightly acidic to alkaline conditions so don't be afraid to lime every few years. I'm not sure I would try it, but this plant was used in the past for treating stomach and other intestinal disorders.

Check out these two eastern natives. A number of cultivars have been developed for home gardens. Pick the ones that fit your situation best. For information on phlox species and care or for any other on other horticultural topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or your local Cooperative Extension Center.