

PHLOX

BOTANICAL NAME: *Phlox*

FAMILY: *Polemoniaceae*

North America is home to native phloxes. The name phlox comes from the Greek *phlox*, meaning, “flame.” By 1732 the American phlox had been taken to England and was mentioned by the botanist Johann Jacob Dillenius as one of the special plants in Dr. James Sherard’s famous garden at Eltham. Sherard commissioned Dillenius to write a description of his garden and also introduced Dillenius to Linnaeus. Dillenius thought Linnaeus’s botanical classifications poorly done; however, after talking to Linnaeus he was converted to Linnaeus’s ways of classifying. Initially, England had two varieties of phlox *Phlox paniculata* and *Phlox subulata*.



Thomas Drummond, curator of the Belfast Botanic Garden, went to America in 1831 as an independent plant collector and explored much of the Northwest by himself. It is he who sent England the *Phlox drummondii*, and it is this phlox that we recognize more readily than other varieties.

While exploring the American Northwest, Drummond sent his guide away and spent one winter alone in a brush hut. He survived by chewing on an old deerskin when, because of snow blindness, he could not see to hunt game. He was able to scare most grizzlies away by shaking his specimen box at them, but when he got between a mother bear and her cub, he was almost killed. Drummond’s other adventures include surviving an epidemic of cholera when aboard a ship, and almost starving while wintering alone on Galveston Island, losing the use of one hand for two months and experiencing boils all over his body so that he could not lie down. These adventures only seemed to make Drummond certain of his need to stay in America and have his family join him. He traveled to Cuba in 1835 and died there from unrecorded causes. One of the last plants he sent to Kew Gardens in care of Sir Joseph Hooker was the *Phlox drummondii*.

Soon Victorian gardeners were hybridizing and developing its beauty. Drummond’s brother stated later that he saw his brother’s phlox growing in Australia.

Though we have not experienced the frightening adventures of Thomas Drummond, we can appreciate the phlox’s beauty as it flames in so many of our gardens.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names
by Diana Wells