

Tips From Trecanna



Trecanna Nursery is a family-run plant nursery owned by Mark & Karen Wash and set on the Cornish slopes of the Tamar Valley, specialising in unusual bulbs & perennials, Crocosmias and other South African plants. Each month Mark will write a feature on some of his very favourite plants.

Trecanna Nursery is now open from Wednesday to Saturday throughout the year, from 10am to 5pm, (or phone to arrange a visit at other times). There is a wide range of unusual bulbs, herbaceous plants and hardy South African plants including the largest selection of Crocosmia in the South. We are located approx. 2 miles north of Gunnislake. Follow the brown tourist signs from the A390, Callington to Gunnislake road. Tel: 01822 834680. Email: mark@trecanna.com Talks to garden clubs and societies.

‘Alliums Of All Shapes & Sizes’

Last year I covered a number of fabulous Alliums that you plant and enjoy in your garden, however as there are so many excellent varieties to choose from, I have decided to look at some more - particularly as May & June is when the vast majority of them burst into flower. The main displays of spring flowering bulbs, including narcissi and most tulips, are just coming to an end in May. The Alliums fulfil a valuable task, bridging the gap between Spring & Summer before many of our herbaceous plants come into their prime.

There are a vast array of wild Alliums in existence coming from areas such as Asia, North America and Europe – in fact the wild species number over 700 and with all the hybrids that have been bred over the years the choice is now literally thousands. They are all members of the onion family but don't worry, they will not make your border smell of onions! – With the exception of just a few, the leaves only smell when crushed.

The normal image of an Allium that earns a place in so many gardening books and magazines, is of a tall sturdy stem growing in a sunny herbaceous border with a large ball of deep-purple flowers atop. Yet with such a wide choice of species to choose from, Alliums are extremely varied in shape, colour and size.

COLOUR - As well as the traditional purple you will find forms in shades of pink, lilac and white but there are a few wonderful exceptions with blue or golden-yellow flowers. *Allium caeruleum* is a species with vibrant blue flowers around 1.5” across – a close-up photograph can often fool you into thinking that it is an *Agapanthus*.

SHAPE - The individual blooms are usually quite tiny but are often formed into rounded heads with hundreds of flowers packed together in balls that give real impact. But again there are exceptions: **Allium cristophii** is a superb variety that bears large and starry lilac flowers in a head that is 8” across! The flowers open one by one and it has quite rightly earned its name as The Firework Allium as it perfectly resembles an exploding firework. Other varieties tend to bear heads of flowers that hang down in loose clusters forming a more gentle nodding effect.

SIZE – Don’t worry about size. With so many to choose from there will be an Allium to suit a place in your garden. Low rock-garden varieties grow just a few inches tall and make good plants for the tops of walls, rock-gardens and containers. Other forms can climb to 4-5ft high like the majestic **Allium giganteum** with its large purple heads.

LEAVES - The leaves on Alliums are generally not their best feature – don’t worry if the tips of your leaves turn brown – it’s not your garden skills at fault! Just as they come into bloom many varieties (especially the taller ones) look rather tatty at the base so I generally find that they are best planted amongst herbaceous plants that grow up to mask the leaves. But yet again there are exceptions to this rule – the lower forms seem to stay tidy and in particular **Allium karataviense** bears gorgeous blue-purple leaves that splay out to form a stunning carpet of foliage, look rather like fresh hosta leaves. The balls of flowers are soft dusky-pink and grow no higher than 8” making this an excellent form for planting in groups or carpets in rock-gardens, atop walls and in patio containers. Another form is **Allium karataviense Ivory Queen** with blue-grey leaves and ivory-white flowers.

The flowers of many Alliums are excellent for cutting or drying, but we like to leave them to dry on the growing plant where they will often stay looking good for many months after they finish flowering.

Where to grow Alliums

The golden rules for most Alliums are to grow them in a sunny, well-drained position. Taller varieties will perform better in a border sheltered from strong winds but the shorter varieties are happy in most sunny positions. We find that putting a couple of handfuls of grit in the base of the planting hole really helps to keep the bulbs well drained, even during wet weather.

The smaller ones will also benefit from a sprinkling of grit on the surface which will help to stop rain splashing soil onto the low flowers.

They are not fussy about soil and seem to need little care after planting – indeed many seem to do better for us when in quite poor conditions.

Alliums are hardy so leave them in from year to year – it does not harm to give a little extra protection to **Allium cristophii**, **caeruleum** and **schubertii** by giving them a good winter mulch. Some will form small bulbils around the base of each bulb which will then grow on to form clumps that can be split and replanted after the leaves die down. Also look out for baby bulbils forming inside the fading flower head on some forms.

Gather the seed from the dried flower heads and sow them in seed trays outdoors – flowering takes 2-4 years.

Here is a pick of some our favourite varieties. Those with the suffix AGM have been awarded the Royal Horticultural Society “Award of Garden Merit”:

Allium caeruleum AGM (The Blue Allium) – A really useful Allium with rounded heads around 1.5” across on wiry stems 2ft high (60cm). Try growing it with *Alchemilla mollis* (Lady’s Mantle) where the blue flowers contrast superbly with the lime & yellow background.

Allium cristophii (The Firework Allium) AGM – An excellent variety with large, lilac starry blooms formed into balls around 8”(20cm) across. Grows 1 to 2 ft high depending on the conditions. The flower heads dry well on the plant often still creating an effective display into Autumn. Prefers a little more protection from cold than other varieties.

Allium ‘Gladiator’ AGM – One of the large giant alliums with impressive heads of deep lilac-purple flowers on stems 4-5ft high (120-150cm). Very close but with a slightly deeper colour is **Allium giganteum**.

Allium karataviense AGM – Quite unlike many of the other alliums, this gem forms the most beautiful low strap-like blue-purple leaves with purple edges. They resemble young hostas but without the slug problem! The flowers form 2-3” (5-8cm) balls and are pale pink with purple marks. Overall it is just 4-8” in height (10-20cm) making it good for rockeries, tops of walls or in containers. **Allium ‘Ivory Queen’** is even better with grey-blue leaves with cream edges and creamy white flowers.

Allium ‘Mount Everest’ – This is a superb relatively new hybrid with grey-blue leaves and large white heads on 3-4ft (90-120cm) stems. A lovely one to mix in with the purples & lilacs to calm the colours.

Allium moly ‘Jeannine’ AGM – A warming golden-yellow Allium that is great in rock-gardens and containers. It grows to around 10” (25cm) high and this particular form is superior to the standard variety.

Allium ‘Purple Sensation’ AGM – One of the best mid-height border alliums, Purple Sensation has neat 3-4” (8-10cm) balls on 3ft (1m) stems. It is better priced than most of its taller cousins which makes it excellent if you need a number to fill a border. As a bonus, Purple Sensation self seeds and splits well so your display should get better year by year.

Allium schubertii – Spectacular heads of tiny flowers on stalks of differing lengths formed into a loose ball up to 12” (30cm) across. Grows 1-2ft (30-60cm) high depending on the situation. Needs a sheltered spot.

Allium sphaerocephalon (The Bee Allium) – A pretty but much overlooked variety that flowers in mid-summer. It bears tightly packed ovoid heads of flowers that vary from pink to deep red-brown on wiry stems around 2ft 6” (70cm) high. Good for growing through low perennials such as catmint in a sunny border.

There are lots more Alliums but this is just a taste!

Happy Gardening!

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