

# Trecanna's Choice



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

*Trecanna Nursery is open on Fridays & Saturdays throughout the year, from 10am to 5pm, (or phone to arrange a visit at other times). During November, there will be a host of fresh and potted bulbs plus late flowering herbaceous perennials ready for sale. Bulbs can also be posted – send an SAE for a list. A wide collection of Crocosmia are now being divided and a new list will be available soon. Trecanna Nursery is located approx. 2 miles north of Gunnislake. Follow the signs from opposite the Donkey Park on the A390, Callington to Gunnislake road. Tel: 01822 834680. Email: [mark@trecanna.com](mailto:mark@trecanna.com)*

## ‘The Wild Side Of Muscari’

Mention *Muscari* amongst gardening enthusiasts a good many throw their hands in the air and shriek – “Oh no – not Grape Hyacinths!” I usually intervene and ask: “What other plant produces such a pretty and reliable display of BLUE flowers in small borders, rock-gardens, pots and troughs year after year with no care or attention from us gardeners?” Ah! Maybe we would miss them if they were not there after all.

The Grape Hyacinth – or to call it by its posh name, *Muscari armeniacum* is a small bulb that flourishes in many a spring garden to produce a swathe of 8” high bright blue flowers that divide and self-seed until they overflow from borders to line the edges of pathways and patios. It is remarkably reliable, pest-free and (unlike tulips and daffodils) the leaves wither and disappear fairly soon after the flowers making it quite a tidy plant.

However, the genus *Muscari* has so much more to offer than the vigorous and relatively common Grape Hyacinth. The name *Muscari* comes from the latin ‘*muscus*’ eluding to the sweet aromatic Musk fragrance carried by some of the species – these were highly prized in former civilisations.

In the wild, they originate from the Mediterranean to South West Asia where they mainly grow in gritty soil on sunny slopes or in grass from coastal areas to lower mountains & hills. There around 30 wild species and a number of modern hybrids but this

is one bulb that does not seem to be dominated by man as yet. I find it pleasing that most of the bulbs that you can buy come from cultivated stocks of the original wild species meaning that you can track back information on their original home.

The many small flowers are usually borne on short spires (called racemes), each downward-facing bloom resembling a tiny bell or tube. In many varieties the flowers towards the top of the raceme are a different colour to the rest and sterile – this is probably some way of making the flowers stand out to passing insects in the wild. The colour range is mainly blue (from soft powder-puff blue to rich violet), but there are also white forms and even lemon-yellow with purple-brown highlights.

The flowering period is March to May depending on the variety and most will give a good display over a 4-6 week period. As we all know, many larger bulbs can easily become damaged if poor Spring weather hits us, but Muscari always seem to fare well, no doubt due to their downward facing blooms and low height.

Most are hardy provided the drainage is good – a few varieties such as *M.macrocarpum* and *M.comosum* are best in a more sheltered site.

## **WHERE AND HOW TO PLANT THEM**

I find Muscari to be charming plants which are terrific for sunny places - plant them at the front of borders, edges of paths, in banks, rock-gardens, tops of walls and particularly in containers. Like so many plants their real beauty is best appreciated when close-up so I always like to plant a few in small terracotta bowls and pots that can be brought up on to an outdoor table or ledge when they are just about to flower. They can also be brought into a cool porch or room.

In addition, the stronger growing varieties make excellent bulbs for naturalising in grass – I'm not sure why they are so rarely used in this way. Why not be the first one in your town or village to have a swathe through your lawn?

They combine well with many rock-garden bulbs – noticeably with wild or species tulips and dwarf narcissus that flower at the same time. They can also make effective ground-cover for taller tulips in formal borders or larger containers, showing the tulips off to their best.

The bulbs are fairly small and rounded and need to be planted 3-4" deep any time from September to early November. Some will tolerate later planting provided the bulbs are fresh. Ready potted clumps can be planted any time up to flowering. I find it a good idea to add some sand or grit under the bulbs and top top-dress the surface with grit which stops rain from splashing soil onto the flowers. Clumps can be allowed to multiply naturally and split in subsequent years during the Summer. Many varieties will self-seed or the seed can be gathered and sown in trays in during the Autumn.

## **OUR FAVOURITE MUSCARI**

Here are a few suggestions from some of our favourites:

### ***Muscari armeniacum* AGM**

The common Grape Hyacinth. Vigorous grower with bright blue flowers in dense racemes – with a slight white edge to each bloom. Great value as ground cover but not the best choice if you want controlled clumps.

Flowers Mch-Apr Ht. 8” (20cm)

### ***Muscari azureum* AGM**

Pretty sky-blue flowers on dainty short stems that last for weeks and weeks, lovely in pots. One of our favourites.

Flowers Mch-Apr Ht. 4-6” (10-15cm)

### ***Muscari azureum f. album***

A lovely dwarf white form of *Muscari azureum*, superb in rockeries and small pots. Alternate clumps with other blue Muscari to great effect. Slower to grow than the blue form.

Flowers Mch-Apr Ht. 4-6” (10-15cm)

### ***Muscari comosum* ‘Plumosum’**

Unusual feathery purple-violet plumes of flowers that form a purple cloud above the leaves, good for the front of a sunny border or rockery. Long flowering period – needs shelter from persistent frosts.

Flowers Apl-May. Ht 6-8” (15-20cm)

### ***Muscari aucheri* ‘Dark Eyes’**

A relatively new form of Muscari with spikes of small deep blue bell-shaped flowers, each with a pronounced white rim. A lovely addition to the garden - excellent in pots or sunny rockeries and borders.

Flowers Apl-May. Ht 4-8” (10-20cm)

### ***Muscari latifolium***

A unique and fabulous Muscari with spikes of deep violet-blue flowers topped with a cluster of sterile sky-blue flowers to create a display that you cannot walk by in the garden without stopping to look. Easy to grow in well drained soil in full sun - superb in containers poking through white violas.

Flowers Mch-Apl. Ht 6-8” (15-20cm)

***Muscari macrocarpum***

A rare and unusual form of Muscari from the cliff-tops of Turkey & Greece. It produces small spikes of lemon-yellow bell shaped flowers topped by a cluster of purple brown blooms. Incredibly fragrant. It enjoys baking in full sun & very well drained soil and shelter from severe cold. Grow it in pots, tops of walls or rockeries. Highly recommended.

Flowers Mch-Apl. Ht 4-6" (10-15cm)

***Muscari 'Valerie Finnis'***

Good sized pale powder-blue flowers on short rounded spikes - a noticeable form of Muscari that combines well in pots and rockeries. Always looks great in flower at the nursery - long flowering period.

Flowers Apl-May. Ht 8" (20cm)

Happy Gardening!

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