



Ornamental Alliums

For discerning gardeners, ornamental onions are indispensable additions to the spring and summer bulb display. And now's the perfect time to plant them. BY CAROLE OTTESEN

SAY “BULBS” and the first ones that tend to pop into a gardener’s mind are tulips, daffodils, and crocuses. Alliums are an afterthought. In spite of remarkable attributes—showy flowers that attract bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds and are great for cutting and drying; easy culture; exceptional hardiness; and deer and vole resistance—alliums don’t get the recognition they deserve. Dilys Davies, author of *Alliums: The Ornamental Onions*, describes the genus as “undeservedly neglected...at-

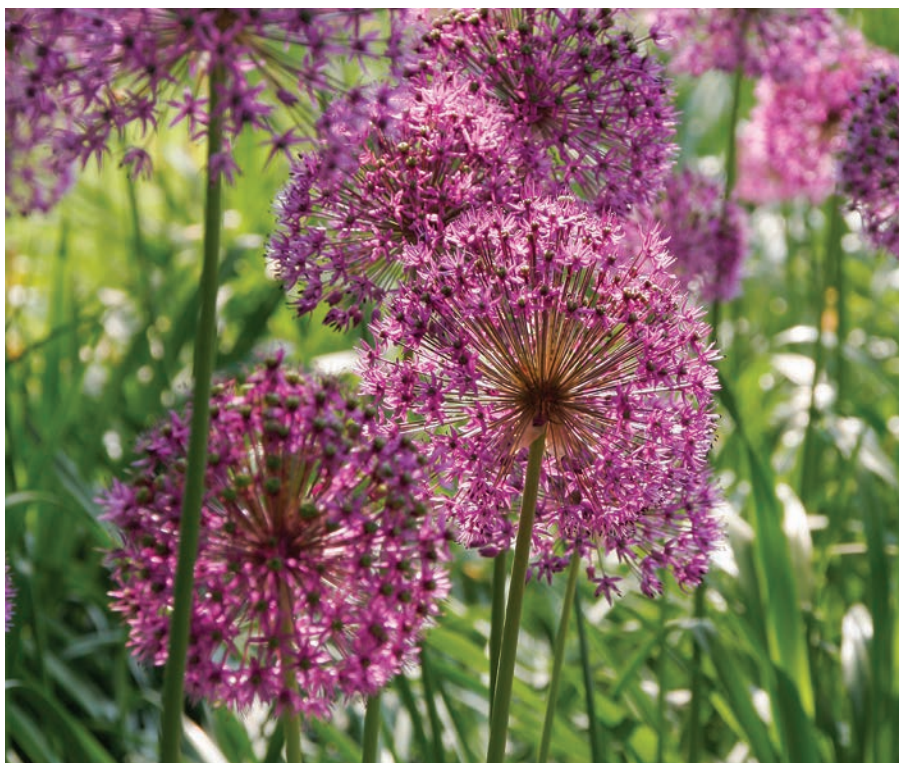
tracting a smallish circle of enthusiasts, plus the odd fanatic.”

It’s hard to single out a reason why these spectacular bulbs are not more roundly appreciated, but perhaps it has something to do with their culinary associations. I grew culinary onions—chives, onions, shallots, and garlic—for years before I got around to trying the purely ornamental side of the family.

A star in any garden, ‘Globemaster’ allium produces eight- to 10-inch-wide flower heads.

I remember clearly that the first ornamental onion to come into my garden was a dim second choice. First choice had been the June-blooming giant alliums (*A. giganteum*) with their magnificent six-inch flower heads. I had dreamed of a flock of them, but when I learned how expensive a single bulb was, in a momentary paroxysm of parsimony, I opted for a dozen of the less-expensive Persian or “tall drumstick” alliums (*A. aflatumense*). Thus it was that on a brilliant October day, while popping in bulbs between clumps of fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*)

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Flowering in May, 'Purple Sensation' is one of the earliest-blooming big-headed alliums.

that instead of feeling euphoric, I fretted: Why hadn't I just bought what I had intended to buy in the first place? How could 12 bulbs that sold for the price of three be anywhere near as showy?

The following May proved those worries unfounded. Four-inch balls made up of hundreds of tiny purple florets rose on three-foot stalks through a groundcover of emerging fountain grass. Not only were Persian alliums a bargain, they were

spectacular. And combining them on a low mound with an ornamental grass turned out to be a stroke of dumb luck; I hadn't anticipated that the grass would camouflage bulb foliage that yellows just as the flowers appear. My Persian alliums are attractive, healthy, and have returned in greater numbers every spring for more than a decade, although the flowers have declined somewhat in size. And it's a combination that mystifies visitors to the gar-

den who ask, "What is that grass with those amazing flowers?"

BIG-HEADED ALLIUMS

Persian alliums (*Allium aflatunense*, USDA Hardiness Zones 4–8, AHS Heat Zone 8–1) belong to a group that I've come to think of as the "big-headed alliums," an unscientific but descriptive name that encompasses some showy types of horticultural origin and mixed parentage. (Because allium species freely hybridize with one another, identifying the parentage of selections can sometimes be problematic.)

One of these, 'Purple Sensation'—to my eye identical to Persian allium but for its deep, dark reddish-purple color—is often listed as a selection of *A. hollandicum*. It grows one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half feet tall and produces three-inch-wide flower heads in late spring to early summer. Crosses of Persian allium with other species have produced a bevy of beauties with attributes that blur the distinctions between species. 'Gladiator', most likely a hybrid of *A. aflatunense* and *A. macleanii*, also grows three to four feet tall and bears rose-purple flower heads in late spring to early summer that are almost four inches wide.

Allium 'Mars' is a spectacular hybrid that bears six-inch-wide, lavender-purple umbels. Three to four feet tall, it flowers in late spring. 'Mount Everest' produces six-inch-wide pure white snowballs.

Of course, the poster child of the big-headed alliums is *A. giganteum* (Zones 3–9, 9–5), the one I had originally lust-

PLANTING AND CARING FOR ORNAMENTAL ALLIUMS IN THE GARDEN

Fall is the perfect time to plant alliums, which, like most temperate-zone bulbs, require a period of cold dormancy to grow well and bloom. You can plant them anytime before the ground freezes, burying the top of the bulb at a depth three times its diameter.

Most alliums originated in regions that experience hot, dry summers and very cold winters. And many are native to steppe, scree, or mountain habitats where the soil is thin and porous. So it's hardly surprising to learn that nearly all alliums—particularly those with larger bulbs—grow best in free-draining soil. If all you have is wet clay, you'll have to create a raised bed for your alliums or amend vigorously with organic matter and/or chicken grit (you can find the latter at a farm supply store). A site in full sun is necessary for all but the woodland species.

If alliums are a bit demanding about drainage, they make up for it by withstanding extreme cold. I discovered just how hardy alliums are one summer during a visit to the botanical garden at the University of Turku, Finland's ancient capital. Giant allium, Turkistan allium, and cultivars such as 'Mars' and 'Purple Sensation' were thriving in this garden located north of 60 degrees northern latitude (approximately equivalent to the border between the Canadian provinces and the Northwest Territories).

A number of alliums, such as *A. aflatunense*, *A. cristophii*, *A. giganteum*, and *A. sphaerocephalon*, have foliage that yellows as flowers appear. Planting these among lower-growing perennials, such as hostas, keeps the bed looking trim.

Propagate alliums by dividing them in spring or fall. Most species need to be divided every few years to prevent overcrowding and maintain vigor.

—C.O.



Low-growing Turkistan allium is especially suited for the front of borders. In this mixed bed with a cool, predominantly blue color scheme, it harmonizes well with other blue-leaved plants such as *Euphorbia* sp., blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*), *Sempervivum tectorum*, and *Artemisia* sp.

ed after, smitten by a catalog photo of a softball-sized flower atop a tall scape that dwarfed the small child beside it. The fall after my success with Persian alliums, I made haste to the garden center and spent a small fortune on giant alliums.

Significantly larger than Persian alliums, giant alliums have celebrity presence. In the June border, six-inch balls of dark lavender florets on four-foot stems float majestically above lower-growing perennials. An equally attractive white form, ‘White Giant’ (which, depending on sources, may actually be a selection of *A. stipitatum*) is also available.

While Persian alliums provide big, bold additions to late spring bouquets, giant alliums are bouquets in themselves. Blooming slightly later than Persian alliums, giant alliums extend the display and cutting season. If you plant both, you’ll have two months of terrific cut flowers that bring long-lasting substance to bouquets and even preserve well as dried flowers.

These two species flower in concert with the late-spring-to-summer crowd, including Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia* spp.), late daffodils and tulips, bleeding

hearts (*Dicentra* spp.), columbines (*Aquilegia* spp.), *Brunnera* spp., peonies, and oriental poppies (*Papaver orientale*). After bloom, the seed heads remain attractive while discreet foliage—amazing in plants that make such an impact—departs with courteous dispatch and little mess.

The star of Persia (*A. cristophii*, Zones 3–9, 9–5) bears eight-inch balls of loose, shaggy, metallic blue-violet florets on



Unlike the dense flower heads of most big-headed alliums, those of *Allium schubertii* are open and skeletal.

rather disproportionate 15-inch stems. Thriving in a hot spot, it prefers alkaline soil and, like most alliums, demands excellent drainage. Star of Persia is one parent, along with *Allium macleanii*, of ‘Globemaster’, a Guinness Book candidate with blooms eight to 10 inches across.

Bigger, but skeletal in flower, is *A. schubertii* (Zones 4–10, 10–1), which seems too outrageous to be real—an explosion of rosy florets caught in mid-air on an 18-inch stem. I always think of this one as “the tumbleweed allium,” after I read that in its native places—North Africa and central Asia—the dried flower heads eventually break off the withered stems and, blown by the wind, cast their seeds abroad as they roll. Drainage is critical for this summer-dormant allium; I have lost several to wet summers. More prudent souls might lift these bulbs after flowers have faded and replant them in fall.

The Turkistan allium (*A. karataviense*, Zones 3–9, 9–5) hails from a land-locked region in central Asia characterized by harsh high desert plateaus, semi-arid steppes, and the world’s tallest mountains. Finicky about drainage, but excellent in the

Sources

Brent and Becky's Bulbs, Gloucester, VA, (804) 693-3966. www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com.
High Country Gardens, Santa Fe, NM. (800) 925-9387. www.highcountrygardens.com.
John Scheepers, Inc., Bantam, CT, (860) 567-0838, www.johnscheepers.com.
Klehm's Song Sparrow Perennial Farm and Nursery, Avalon, WI. (608) 883-2221. www.songsparrow.com.
Longfield Gardens, Lakewood, NJ. (855) 534-2733. www.longfield-gardens.com.
Odyssey Bulbs, South Lancaster, MA. <http://odysseybulbs.com>.
Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC. (919) 772-4794. www.plantdelights.com.
Wayside Gardens, Hodges, SC. (800) 845-1124. www.waysidegardens.com.
White Flower Farm, Litchfield, CT. (800) 503-9624. www.whiteflowerfarm.com.

Resources

Alliums: The Ornamental Onions by Dilys Davies, Timber Press, Portland, OR, 1992.
Bulbs (revised edition) by John E. Bryan, Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2002.
Herbaceous Perennial Plants (3rd ed.) by Allan Armitage. Stipes Publishing, Chicago, IL, 2008.
North American Rock Garden Society, www.nargs.org. (Has lots of hard-to-find species in its annual seed exchange.)
Pacific Bulb Society, www.pacificbulbsociety.org.

rock garden, the Turkistan allium's elegant appearance belies its robust constitution.

Of all the alliums, this one has the finest foliage, arguably more attractive than the flowers. Two or three elegantly-curved, broad leaves appear in May. They are rigid and ridged, with pale purple stripes on matte blue-green leaves. The six- to eight-inch-wide silvery pink flowers on eight-inch stems are also lovely when dried. To my eye, 'Ivory Queen', a white-flowered form, contrasts more smartly with the leaves.

Old garden favorites include three-foot-tall *A. rosenbachianum* (Zones 4–10, 10–1), which has five-inch-wide pinkish-purple flower heads starred with white stamens, and *A. nigrum* (Zones 5–8, 9–1) has four-inch-wide flower heads comprised of white florets with green eyes on stems up to three feet tall.

THE SMALL-HEADED ALLIUMS

Smallish alliums make up the preponderance of the estimated 800 to 1,000 allium species worldwide. While small-flowered alliums can be easily lost in the garden unless they are massed, many of them multiply quickly. In fact, given the right growing conditions, some may become invasive, so it's a good idea to check with your local Extension Service or public garden to find out which ones might show aggressive tendencies in your region.

Happily, several outstanding selections produce sterile or semi-sterile seeds. One of the most popular is 'Millenium', introduced by Massachusetts allium breeder

Mark McDonough. A hybrid of *Allium nutans* (Zones 3–9, 9–1), a species native to Siberia, 'Millenium' produces two-inch-wide lavender-colored flower heads in late summer on compact, one-foot-tall plants with an equal spread.

McDonough also introduced 'Sugar Melt', a hybrid of *A. senescens* ssp. *glaucum* (also listed as *A. senescens* var. *glaucum* and *A. senescens* 'Glaucum'), a species native to Siberia and Mongolia.

Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina, notes that 'Sugar Melt' "is head and shoulders above any other alliums we grow." Compact plants grow only 14 to 16 inches tall and produce a profusion of light pink flower heads for about a month in late summer.

Another hybrid derived from *A. senescens* is 'Pink Planet', which features three-inch-wide pale pink or lavender flower heads in mid- to late summer. Plants grow eight to



'Millenium' is considered one of the best selections to come along in years, and for good reason—it blooms profusely, its flowers last for about a month, and it won't reseed and become invasive.

18 inches tall with gray-green foliage and are drought resistant.

‘Summer Beauty’ is a selection of *A. angulosum* (Zones 4–9, 9–1), a native of central Europe and northern Asia. Introduced by Roy Diblik of Northwest Perennial Farm in Wisconsin, it grows 16 to 18 inches high and has an attractive mounding habit. Soft lavender or pink flower heads are one-and-a-half to two inches wide and bloom from late June to late July.

Among the smaller allium species worth searching for are *A. zebdanense* (Zones 4–9, 9–3), a rock garden candidate with inch-wide demure white flowers on 15-inch stems and drumstick allium (*A. sphaerocephalon*, Zones 4–II, 12–I), which has egg-shaped, dark cerise flower heads that bloom in early to midsummer on plants that grow one to three feet tall. Blue garlic (*A. caeruleum*, sometimes listed as *A. azureum*, Zones 2–7, 7–1), bears one- to two-inch flower heads in late spring or early summer that are the steel blue of a stormy sky. Its 18-inch-tall flower scapes are especially wonderful coming up through and around low, sprawling plants such as sage, veronica, and creeping phlox. This species spreads by setting seed and/or multiplying bulbs—just enough to make a good show in my garden, but it might be more aggressive in other regions, so plant with care.

Lily leek (*A. moly*, Zones 3–9, 9–1), a hardy southerner with cheerful, clear yellow, two-inch flower heads that bloom in May to June on one-foot stems, will naturalize in part and even dry shade. ‘Jeanine’ is a form that usually produces two flower stalks instead of one.

While lily leek is hardy far north of its Iberian origins, the loose-flowered white Naples garlic (*A. neapolitanum*, Zones 7–9, 9–7) isn’t. Native to sunny, dry soils in Portugal and around the Mediterranean, its bulbs will rot in wet clay, but will thrive in a baking “hell-strip.” Reaching 15 inches tall, its loose, white flower heads exude a sweet fragrance, atypical for alliums. (This species can be invasive where the climate is mild; it is on California’s noxious weed list.)

If you are looking for a shorter species, try *A. thunbergii* ‘Ozawa’ (Zones 3–8, 9–1),

Native to much of North America, nodding onion gets its name from its downward-facing flower heads, which grow atop 15-inch stems.



The foliage of drumstick allium turns yellow before the plant finishes flowering, creating a muted background for its deep red blossoms.

old garden form with deep rosy pink, two-inch-wide shuttlecock-shaped flowers on four- to 12-inch stems.

NATIVE ALLIUMS

About 100 alliums, primarily small-flowered, are native to North America. Of these, the easiest to procure and, perhaps, to grow is the nodding onion (*A. cernuum*, Zones 3–9, 9–5), which blooms in July. True to its name, this onion’s flowers in all shades of pink droop over as if their 15-inch stems are too weak to hold them up. The cultivar ‘Wine Drop’, introduced in 2013 by Illinois-based Intrinsic Perennial Gardens but not yet widely available to home gardeners, features pink flowers with pedicels that are a contrasting dark red in cool weather.

Another easy-to-find native is American prairie onion, also as known as autumn onion and glade onion (*A. stellatum*, Zones 3–9, 9–3). McDonough describes this spe-



A QUICK GUIDE TO SELECTED ALLIUMS

Name (botanical and common)	Height (feet)	Flower color	Bloom period	USDA/AHS Zones
<i>A. aflatanunse</i> (Persian allium)	2½–4	purple	May	4–8, 8–1
* <i>A. cernuum</i> (nodding onion)	1–1½	pink	July to August	3–9, 9–5
<i>A. cristophii</i> (star of Persia)	1–1½	metallic violet	May to June	3–9, 9–5
<i>A. flavum</i>	1	yellow	July to August	4–10, 9–1
<i>A. giganteum</i> (giant allium)	4	purple	June	3–9, 9–5
'Gladiator' (hybrid)	4	rose-purple	June	4–8, 8–1
'Globemaster' (hybrid)	3½	purple	May to June	4–8, 8–1
<i>A. karataviense</i> (Turkistan allium)	½–1	silvery pink, white	May	3–9, 9–5
'Mars' (hybrid)	3–4	lavender-purple	May to June	4–8, 8–1
'Millenium' (hybrid)	1	lavender	July to August	3–9, 9–1
<i>A. moly</i>	1	bright yellow	May to June	3–9, 9–1
<i>A. neapolitanum</i> (Naples garlic)	1–1½	white	April to June	7–9, 9–7
<i>A. nigrum</i>	1½	white and green	May	5–8, 9–1
<i>A. oreophilum</i>	1	deep rose	May to June	4–9, 9–1
'Purple Sensation' (hybrid)	1½–2½	reddish purple	May to June	4–9, 9–1
<i>A. rosenbachianum</i>	3–4	rose and white	May to June	4–10, 10-1
<i>A. schubertii</i>	1½–2	silvery pink	June	4–10, 10-1
<i>A. sphaerocephalon</i> (drumstick allium)	1½–2	maroon to purple	June to July	4–11, 12–1
* <i>A. stellatum</i> (American prairie onion)	1–2	pink to lavender	variable, July to October	3–9, 9–3
* <i>A. texanum</i>	1½	white	July	5–9, 9–5
<i>A. thunbergii</i> 'Ozawa'	½–1	rose-pink	September to October	3–8, 9–1
* <i>A. unifolium</i>	1–1½	lavender-pink	May to June	4–9, 9–1
<i>A. zebdanense</i>	1½	white	May to June	4–9, 9–3

*Alliums native to North America

cies as “highly variable, but always a lovely summer-blooming plant.” Plants bloom from late summer into mid-fall and grow one to two feet tall. Three- to four-inch-wide flower heads range in color from deep pink to pale lavender.

Other native alliums are harder to find but can be obtained through specialty nurseries and the seed exchanges of the North American Rock Garden Society and other plant societies (see “Resources,” page 15). These include species such as Douglas’ onion (*A. douglasii*, Zones 6–9, 9–6) from the Northwest, which has pretty pink and white flowers; *A. bolanderi* (Zones 8–9, 9–6), a compact species from the Siskiyou Mountains with dark, rose-red flowers; and Drummond’s onion (*A. drummondii*, Zones 4–10, 9–4) from the Great Plains with white, pink, or red flowers.

One-leaved onion (*A. unifolium*, Zones 4–9, 9–1) is native to cool, moist coastal ranges of California and Oregon and thus more tolerant of moisture than most alliums. Despite its name, it has two



The flower heads of one-leaved onion are comprised of 15 to 35 lavender-pink flowers.

or three leaves above which nodding lavender-pink flowers on 15-inch stems appear in early summer.

A plant’s place of origin gives valuable clues to its care and placement in the garden. When a friend brought me bulbs of *A. texanum* (Zones 5–9, 9–5), an 18-inch

white-flowered species from Texas, I planted them on a sun-baked, rocky hill where, with good drainage, they have prospered.

FINALLY GETTING SOME RESPECT?

Perhaps it is because I am attuned to them and becoming one of the “odd fanatics” Davies describes, but it seems more and rarer species of ornamental alliums are becoming available commercially. I like to think the real reason for their popularity is because they are finally getting the recognition they deserve. Most are very hardy, reproduce handily, are easy to grow, and exit quietly after blooming—

without endlessly-photosynthesizing, floppy foliage. Just the fact that they are gorgeous and deer resistant elevates them to star status in my garden.

Carole Ottesen is a contributing editor of The American Gardener. This is an updated and revised version of an article that was originally published in the September/October 2003 issue of The American Gardener.