

## ALLIUMS

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As a garden designer and plantaholic, I have always loved alliums. Like most people, I started with *Allium* 'Purple Sensation' and then tried a few other varieties after that. But a few years ago I decided I would like to see if I could find other varieties that would flower at different times to the usual May/June. I set myself the task of trying to grow alliums that would flower from April to October, and I drew up a list of about 40 alliums that I would try. I don't have a huge garden, so I had to decide how I was going to accommodate them all. The best plan seemed to spread them between the allotment I share with my husband, and our garden at home. As you can imagine, my husband wasn't too keen on losing some of his precious vegetable-growing space to some flowers. So I persuaded him by explaining that he could eat some of them, though I had no intention of letting him.

### April

The first to flower was *Allium triquetrum*, with small white flowers that dangle to one side. But be careful with this one; it can be invasive. This was followed in mid April by *A. aschersonianum*, which is a lovely rich wine red, but I feel the flower ball is too small for the length of the stem. Then the large, purple flowered *Allium* 'Stratos' in late April, definitely worth growing.

### May

*Allium* 'Stratos' was still flowering, and was joined by *A.* 'Early Emperor', which is purple with distinctive white anthers; *A. rosenorum* 'Purple King'; *A.* 'Purple Sensation'; *A.* 'Silver Spring', which has white flowers and unusual red ovaries; *A. falcifolium*, small with loose pink flowers, and *A.* 'Mars', another purple variety.

### June

Three of my favourites start flowering in early June: *Allium* 'Mercurious', a dark purple shuttlecock shape flower head; *A.* 'Eros', a lovely short stemmed pink variety, and *A. cristophii*, with its metallic lilac flowers. This was followed by *A.* 'Graceful', also known incorrectly as *A.* 'Graceful Beauty'; *A. unifolium*, a pale pink flower and parent to *A.* 'Eros'; *A. caeruleum*, a true blue flowering species; *A. stipitatum*; *A.* 'Mount Everest', and *A.* 'Mont Blanc'. *Allium cernuum*, with its clear, mid-pink flowers was just starting to flower, but does cross into July.

### July

By now, many of the big showy alliums were over, but they had been replaced by beautiful more delicate alliums such as *A. flavum*, with unusual yellow flowers; *A. lusitanica*; *A. carinatum* subsp. *pulchellum*, which is similar to *A. flavum* but with pink flowers, and *A. sphaerocephalon*.

### August

At the end of July and into August, I had *A.* 'White Cloud', a leek-like white with a hint of pink, and *A.* 'Summer Drummer', which is the most extraordinary allium as it grows 2m high and needs no support. The minute *A. cyaneum*, one of the 'small true blues', was now flowering, as was *A. macranthum*, a pink one that is similar looking to *A. cernuum*, and *A. tuberosum*, better known as garlic chives.

### September

I bought *Allium wallichii* for its September flowers. It enjoys semi-shade and is happier in damper soils than most of the usually available alliums. It has looser flowers than 'Purple Sensation' and a

slightly stronger, richer colour, and stands 60cm tall. It seemed too good to be true. Well, it turned out to be gorgeous, and even better than I expected.

### October

The one allium that I found to flower in October was *Allium thunbergii*, which was my only failure and died in the September before it had flowered. I am trying it again this year.

This isn't the end of the story: I had among my collection an allium I couldn't identify. I also planted A. 'Hair' which turned out not to be, and I couldn't identify this either. So I then bought any book I could find that had botanical descriptions of alliums (eBay is great), and looked at every website I could find that might be able to help. The allium bug slowly took hold. By then, I had over 90 different species and cultivars and still couldn't find out much about these two alliums. I had found out the names of the world's leading experts (there aren't many) and asked them to look at the unknowns, and still I had no answers. I spoke to Sandra Hartley [HPS Southern Counties Group] and she put me in touch with Brian Mathew [author of the definitive guide, *Review of Allium section Allium*], and he can't tell from the pictures I sent him. But this summer, when they flower, Brian thinks he may be able to identify them if I send him a complete specimen. My collection now amounts to about 130 different species and cultivars and is ever growing, and my husband is becoming increasingly nervous about the amount space I am going to be using up at the allotment.

~ First published in the Southern Counties Group Newsletter, May 2015 ~