

A WINTER PERFORMER

Rob Cole

In the sixties, when I began gardening for the first time, heathers were the fashionable plant of the day, and over the next twenty years or so I made a number of heather gardens, joined the Heather Society, and scoured the moorlands during summer holidays in Devon and Cornwall looking for variants of the wild plants. The species which I most loved, however, was the winter flowering heath, *Erica carnea*, which is not a British native but hails from the northern Mediterranean.

Since those days, my interests have moved towards herbaceous perennials, but I have never lost my fascination with heathers and with *E. carnea* in particular.

The wild species is a hummocky-growing, small, evergreen shrub with mauve-pink flowers (*carnea* means flesh, referring to the flower colour) which appear between November and April. Numerous cultivars now abound, which have widened the flower colour from good clean whites, through pinks, to almost red, and golden foliage forms are also widely available.

Their main garden worth lies in their neat habit and in their long flowering period, often from mid-November to late March, a period when the garden is crying out for colour other than russet brown. Planted in groups of varying size, drifting one variety into another, they create considerable impact in an otherwise 'dead' season.

All of the forms of *E. carnea* are completely hardy, and the flowers shrug off the hardest frosts without turning a hair. Indeed, a coating of frost is an added attraction and when the frost melts the flowers emerge completely unscathed.

Most heathers require an acid, peaty soil to do well, but *E. carnea* will grow in limey soils, especially if provided with some compost or other humus to help retain moisture in times of drought. An open, sunny position is best, but some shade (even quite heavy shade) is tolerated without turning the plant too leggy. The annual extension growth is quite short, so no pruning is required, other than to cut out the odd straggly shoot.

Virtually all of the varieties available are good. 'Nathalie' is a good red, as is 'Myretoun Ruby', and the old variety 'Vivellii', which was found in Switzerland in 1906, has dark foliage and carmine red flowers. 'King George' is another old favourite, and has rich pink flowers; 'Whitehall' is a neat white, and 'Ann Sparkes' is an excellent golden-yellow foliaged variety raised by Jack Sparkes from Beoley, near Redditch, in the fifties.

E. carnea is best bought as a small plant and should cost little more than a couple of pounds each, which means that you can afford to plant in groups, which is how they look best. Plant them about 40cm (15") apart and they will join up as a single mass within five years.

The fall of heathers from current favour should not deter anyone from including *E. carnea* in the modern garden. They are easy, colourful and long-lived plants which provide interest at a difficult time of the year. Do try them, you will not be disappointed.

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