



Fig. 1 A popular hybrid, *Erodium* 'Sans-culottes' blooms in the rockery from June to October

## Getting to know erodiums

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The first erodium that I got to know, back in the early 1980s, was the common *E. x variable* 'William Bishop', and I have grown it off and on ever since. Back then, there was not a lot of information I could find on this and other erodiums, especially here in Ontario, Canada. Of course

one thing that I quickly learned was that it was not hardy here (fig. 2). My main plant interest at the time was African violets and their relatives of the Gesneriad family, so bringing in my erodium and growing it under lights for the winter was no problem. They did not mind

coming in, and they bloomed for me all year.

My erodium thrived in the rockery, but digging it up to bring it inside every winter became a chore. Growing it in small planters was one solution, but I also experimented by rooting cuttings in the holes of a brick (fig. 3).



Fig. 2 *E. x variable* 'William Bishop' in the outdoor rock garden



Fig. 3 *E. x v.* 'William Bishop' in the holes of a brick

The erodium thrived in the brick, and was easy to bring inside, to spend the winter on a bright windowsill. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

As the years went on, my interests changed from houseplants to outdoor gardening; rock gardens in particular. Around the year 2000 I was starting to focus on hardy geraniums, and in my quest to learn more I joined several specialty groups based in the UK, for their excellent publications and seed distributions. Through the clubs and now on-line sources, I was starting to see more information about erodiums, as several of those hardy geranium enthusiasts also had a keen interest in these little geranium cousins. As much as I enjoyed reading about them and seeing the photos, I never expected that I would come across any other varieties here in Ontario.

Compared to the UK, we do not have many specialist nurseries in Ontario for alpine gardening, nor for Geraniaceae. So I was very excited in 2013 when I had a chance to visit Wrightman Alpines near London, Ontario, a four-hour drive from where I live in Midhurst. I got even more excited when, after pulling into Wrightman's and parking alongside a raised limestone rockery, I could see that it was covered with several varieties of erodiums which I had previously only seen in photographs. Irene Wrightman took me on a



Fig. 4 *Erodium trifolium*

tour of the rockeries, walking up and down these beds. I was now truly hooked on erodiums!

Needless to say, I took several of these new (to me) erodiums home with me. They over-wintered successfully outdoors at Wrightman's, but I wasn't sure how hardy they would be further north. The London area is USDA zone 6 (winter minimum approximately

-20°C), but here in Midhurst we are zone 4 (fully 10°C lower). So I kept them in a planter and brought them indoors in the autumn.

They struggled indoors, and I learned that these hardier varieties are better left outside in sheltered spots with good snow cover, than they are coming inside. They do not take to indoor life like *E. x v.* 'William Bishop' and *E. trifolium*



Fig. 5 *Erodium cheilanthifolium* in the limestone rockery.



Fig. 6 *Erodium* 'Bidderi' often produces extra petals

(fig. 4) do. The varieties I found at Wrightman's were *E. cheilanthifolium* (fig. 5 – sometimes wrongly named *E. petraeum* subsp. *crispum*), *E.* 'Bidderi' (fig. 6 – sometimes wrongly named *E. kolbianum* 'Natasha'), *E. acaule*, and *E. carvifolium*.

Now we are getting to the biggest problem for the novice erodium enthusiast: there are so many wrong names out there, and they live on through the seed distributions and the internet, including Google images. I'm sure that most hardy planters are used to the ongoing challenge of keeping up with the latest correct naming, no matter what family of plants you are most into. Plant names evolve and change as new information becomes available; some old names remain as synonyms, which helps keep track of these changes.



Fig. 7 The very variable *Erodium x variable*

For example, you often see *Erodium x variable* 'William Bishop' (syn. *E. x v.* 'Bishop's Form') referred to as a form of *E. reichardii*, which is not completely correct. It is in fact a hybrid between *E. reichardii* and *E. corsicum*. Hybrids from this cross have flowers which can vary from dark-pink to white, and as a group they are known as *E. x variable* (fig. 7).

There is a different naming problem with another very popular erodium, *E. trifolium*. In over 90 percent of on-line photographs and in many commercial listings, it is called *Erodium pelargoniflorum*. It is also claimed that the two names are synonyms, which is not strictly true, as the true *E. pelargoniflorum* is a different species, rarely seen. I think this is probably the most common incidence of incorrect naming in the Geraniaceae family (fig. 8), and it is propagated

via the internet and seed distributions. I have ordered *E. pelargoniflorum* numerous times, from several different sources over the last 10 years, and they ALWAYS turn out to be *E. trifolium*!

*Erodium trifolium* is another non-hardy erodium for Ontario growers, but fortunately they do not mind coming in under lights for the winter. They can be hardy in some areas of the UK. Though *E. trifolium* is a much larger plant than *E. x v.* 'William Bishop', they are fairly closely related, and I have successfully bred a hybrid between them. *E. trifolium* dominates the cross, but I know they hybridised because I placed pollen from the former onto a flower of *E. x v.* 'William Bishop'. I got one 'crane's beak', with one viable seed, which produced a seedling very similar in form to *E. trifolium*, but with white star-shaped flowers.

I gave it the name *Erodium* 'North Star' (fig. 9).

*Erodiums* readily hybridise. For the most part they are nice compact plants to work with, and you can grow on a lot of seedlings in a limited space. When pollinating *erodiums*, I get good results by picking a flower in the male phase with lots of pollen, and dabbing that pollen onto a flower in the female phase, when it is receptive to that pollen (figs 10-12). The male and female parts of the flower are not ready at the same time. The annual species are an exception to this, as they tend to self-pollinate; but these are mostly weedy plants which are not all that garden-worthy.

There is one other challenge for enthusiasts who like to collect and grow from seed. This applies to *erodium* species originating from the eastern Mediterranean, which produce separate male and female plants. With these dioecious plants you will need plants of both sexes to get seed. There are a few nice hybrids in circulation, but for the most part, they all seem to be male plants! The most common of these has pale-yellow flowers and silvery foliage, sold as *Erodium chrysanthum*. This is in fact a hybrid involving *E. chrysanthum*, but the pale flowers are not as yellow as the true species. To distinguish the hybrid (all males) from the true species, it is referred to as *E. 'Moon Man'*. It is an



Fig. 8 *E. triflorum* (left) and *E. pelargoniflorum* (right)

extremely hardy *erodium*, and a good choice for any garden.

There is one more group of often-misnamed *erodiums* that I would like to touch on before I move on to matters of cultivation. A lot of the more readily available cultivars are actually variants of the species *Erodium cheilanthifolium*. It is a very variable species, and this has caused much confusion in naming (fig. 13). The most

common form in the wild – and in cultivation – is basically white-flowered, with typical dark blotches on the upper two petals (fig. 14). There are usually pinkish veins radiating out on all petals, and the shade of these veins can vary.

Flowers of popular named forms such as *E. 'Bidderi'* and *E. 'Stephanie'* do have these characteristic blotches and varying shades of veining, but there is much confusion regarding their parentage.



Fig. 9 *Erodium* 'North Star'



Fig. 10 The pollen is ready before the flower is receptive



Fig. 11 Usually, the stamens have long fallen off by the time a flower is receptive



Fig. 12 Pollinating the female flower. You can also use a small artist's brush to spread the pollen

Many erodium enthusiasts feel there has simply been too much renaming of existing plants by the commercial trade. Getting the correct name on your plants is important if you are collecting seed for the various club distributions.

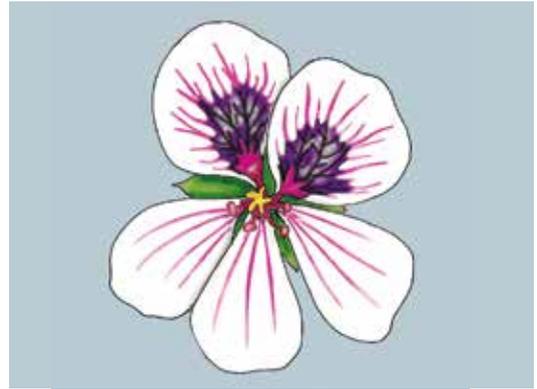
Although erodiums (once you get them identified) are not difficult to grow, there are a few things you can do to improve your chances of success. I have seen wonderful specimens grown in pots, in 'normal' garden conditions, and in rock gardens. Pot-grown plants can thrive in the moderate UK climate; here in Ontario however, harsh winter temperatures (sometimes down to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) are too cold for even the hardiest species. And the majority of the hardy species do not like coming indoors.

People who collect erodiums often protect them in the winter months by placing temporary clear covers over the bed, or by placing them in greenhouse-like shelters (with open sides) to protect from cold winter wet. Good drainage in the ground or in pots is very important. As with many alpine plants, erodiums send roots deep into the ground, so naturally they prefer deep pots (fig. 15).

Conventional rock gardens and the currently popular crevice-style rockeries are perfect for growing erodiums. Growing them among rocks, as they often occur in nature,



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Fig. 13 Variation in *Erodium cheilanthifolium* flower forms

Fig. 14 Diagram of the most common form of *E. cheilanthifolium*

prevents more vigorous plants from crowding them out; they don't compete well with garden thugs. A slightly raised rockery with good drainage will allow your erodiums to survive wet periods, and by encouraging them to develop deep roots

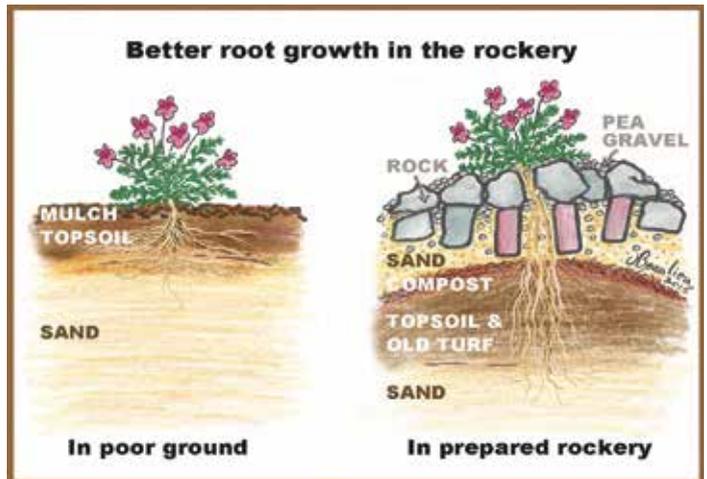
down into moist soil, will also help them through drier periods (fig. 16).  
If you have not tried erodiums, don't be discouraged by the challenges of identification. Give them a try; you will love the almost continual

blooms throughout the summer. And if you do get to know and love them, as a member of the HPS and its Hardy Geranium Group (most of whose members are erodium growers too), you will have access to all the help you will need. 🌸



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Fig. 15 Cutaway view of tall pots, simulating crevice conditions using stones, rocks or concrete fragments



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Fig. 16

**John Beaulieu** is a rock garden, hardy geranium and erodium enthusiast, living in Ontario, Canada. He is a regular contributor to the HPS Hardy Geranium Group newsletter and Facebook group, sharing what he has gleaned, as he tries to get to know these plants better.