**Erodium ‘Special Rose’**

Most erodiums are short-lived, but Erodium chrysanthum goes on and on. It normally has pale-yellow flowers, but this pink hybrid, available for many years as just ‘pink form’, has now been given the name ‘Special Rose’. Because it sets no seed it goes on blooming month after month, providing pale rose-pink flowers above a neat clump of finely cut, grey leaves. Given sun and good drainage, it will delight for years—my plant is over 12 years old. To propagate, take short stubby little basal cuttings in March.

Height/spread 15-20cm x 15-20cm.
Growing conditions Full sun, good drainage.
Hardiness RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.
Origin Hybrid of Erodium chrysanthum x Erodium sp.
Season of interest May – October.

**Astrantia ‘Buckland’**

Astrantias are always good value garden plants, establishing quickly and self-seeding, but the modern hybrids are sterile, putting all their energy into flowering rather than producing seedlings. Thick with flowers in May and June, if cut back hard in early July they will flower magnificently again in September and even October. This is my favourite, its pale-pink flowers like tiny Victorian posies in a ruff of pale-pink bracts. Although they are said to like shade, I find my very best astrantias are sited in damp sun. They just don’t like to dry out.

Height/spread 70cm x 30cm.
Growing conditions Sun or light shade, not too dry.
Hardiness RHS H5, USDA 4a-7b.
Origin Hybrid of A. major x A. maxima.
Season of interest May – June, September.

**Nectaroscordum siculum**

The most elegant and graceful of onions, this used to be called Allium siculum. Tall stems thrust up through twisted glaucous leaves, each tipped with a narrow pointed cluster of buds in a papery sheath. As the buds expand they bend over demurely like shy maidens hiding the purple-flushed inside of each flower under a subtle cream and grey-green skirt. Amazingly, as the seeds begin to ripen they turn up again to make a bouquet of pointed elf hats. In sandy soil it can self-seed excessively, but never seeds for me.

Height/spread 1.1-1.2m x 10-50cm.
Growing conditions Sun or light shade, good drainage.
Hardiness RHS H5, USDA 6a-10b.
Origin Mediterranean.
Season of interest May – July.

**Centaurea montana**

A lovely white form of a perennial cornflower, the whiteness of its outer florets set off by the thin, black inner florets radiating from the centre. Its flowers—which are very attractive to bees—are extra big and the ray florets more finely cut than usual. The leaves are grey and slightly hairy. A tough, reliable plant, which bounces back into flower very quickly if cut to the ground when it starts to look shabby. This way you can keep it in flower from May through to August, or even September.

Height/spread 30-45cm x 30-45cm.
Growing conditions Sun or light shade, good drainage.
Hardiness RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.
Origin Europe.
Season of interest May – August.

**May plants**

As spring gets into its stride, Derry Watkins highlights a selection of flowers that should be taking a starring role in your garden right now

WORDS DERRY WATKINS
PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

Derry Watkins is the owner of Special Plants nursery near Bath specialplants.net

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*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.
**Geranium pyrenaicum**

*Bill Wallis*

Geranium ‘Bill Wallis’ is one of my best self-sowers (although you can also propagate by division). The plants are short lived, almost annual, but appear in profusion every May. I never know quite where they will be; the small, intensely deep violet flowers on thin stems pop up here and there, scrambling through other plants. By July they have vanished. Then in August a second, smaller wave appears. I have heard of people who have too many of them, but for me there are never quite enough to satisfy my appetite.

**Height/spread** 30–45cm x 50cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun or light shade.

**Hardiness** RHS H3, USDA 5a–9b.

**Origin** South West Europe.

**Season of interest** May, June and August.

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**Bunium bulbocastaneum**

*Bunium bulbocastaneum* is also known as the earth chestnut, thanks to its small, crunchy tubers (pipiwai), which can be eaten raw or cooked, and taste like sweet chestnuts. Its seeds are edible too, but I grow it for its beautiful, fine foliage (which can also be eaten) and for its perfect white umbels. I was told it liked a dry site, so I planted it in gravel where it became a pretty 40cm-high plant, but then sowed itself into sticky clay at the edge of the pond where it enjoyed life so much that it grew into a ravishing 90cm of airy leaves and tall-stemmed flowers.

**Height/spread** 50–90cm x 60cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun, damp or dry.

**Hardiness** RHS H4–H5, USDA 5a–9b.

**Origin** Europe and Asia.

**Season of interest** May – June.

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**Anthyllis vulneraria var. coccinea ‘Special Ruby’**

*Special Ruby*

Anthyllis vulneraria is a European wildflower, known as kidney vetch. It has yellow flowers like clover, but the individual flowers are more distinct. Normally, *A. vulneraria var. coccinea* is a much brighter red, which is nice, but this very dark red form is my favourite. The flowers are like little rubies nestling on a tight mat of narrow, silky leaves. It loves chalky, free-draining soil and a gravel garden shows it off to perfection. It is not long-lived, but seeds enough to reproduce itself, never enough to be a nuisance.

**Height** 30cm.

**Origin** Europe.

**Growing conditions** Sun, good drainage.

**Hardiness** RHS H7, USDA 5a–9b.

**Season of interest** May and June.

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**Allium cristophii**

This stunning allium adds drama wherever it is planted – the individual flowers almost touch, creating an astonishing 20cm sphere of shining lavender stars on a 40cm stalk. As the flowers fade and the seeds set, it transforms into a blonde globe. By August the stems are snapping and you can take them inside to dry (perhaps gining one for the top of the Christmas tree), or cheat and thread the hollow stems on to thin canes anywhere in the garden. The strap-like leaves fade by the time the flowers appear, so consider when planting. AGM*

**Height/spread** 40–60cm x 50cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun.

**Hardiness** RHS H7, USDA 5a–9b.

**Origin** Central Asia.

**Season of interest** May – August.

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**Ranunculus aconitifolius ‘Flore Pleno’**

For some reason this is called both fair maids of Kent and fair maids of France. Wherever the maids are from, they’re adorable. Exquisite, double, milky-white pompoms, bounce in the wind on tall stems above a mound of green, lobed leaves. They like some shade with good soil where they won’t dry out. Mine has multiplied gloriously, creating slow-growing clumps. The fair maids disappear after flowering, leaving room for later herbaceous perennials. AGM*

**Height/spread** 80cm x 10–50cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun or shade, moist rich soil.

**Hardiness** RHS H7, USDA 5a–9b.

**Origin** Southern Europe.

**Season of interest** May – September.

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**Erysimum ‘Pastel Patchwork’**

Not as long lived as some of its perennial wallflower cousins, but just as long-blooming and easy to propagate. The wonderful faded shades of soft pink, apricot and cream set it apart from the crowd and make for a beautiful cut flower. It is a sport of ‘Apricot Twist’ and occasionally it sports back, producing tawny orange flowers on an occasional branch. Like ‘Apricot Twist’ it is too busy flowering to ever get very big. Take cuttings while the plant is still young, or cut it hard back in July to promote new growth and extend its life.

**Height/spread** 45–60cm x 45–60cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun, drainage.

**Hardiness** RHS H4, USDA 6a–9b.

**Origin** Southern Europe.

**Season of interest** May – September.

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**Ellen Holderness**

Dig in plantsman’s favourites

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**Russell**

The Victorian garden bones have been enriched and extended with modern planting and in particular a new six-acre three-terraced walled garden designed by Tom Stuart-Smith in 2000. Open Wednesday 10am–4pm, May through September. Wykham Lane, Brroughton, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX15 5DG. Tel 07779 747571. broughtongrange.com

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**JAMES KERR**

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**places to visit**

**Roselaine Garden**

Roselaine Garden is an enchanting, relaxed naturalistic garden in Northern Ireland. It features a garden built of natural rock outcrops, wildflower meadows with intricate woodlands, and drifts of meconopsis. Many rare trees and shrubs, including the rhododendrons, azaleas and magnolias, are wonderful in May and June. The small, intense profusion every May. I never know quite where they will be; the small, intense profusion Every May – June.

**Hardiness** RHS H4–H5, USDA 5a–8b.

**Origin** Europe and Asia.

**Season of interest** May – August.

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**Abbey Garden**

Abbey Garden is on the periphery of the abbey grounds. It consists of two distinct parts. The first is a small garden filled with tender plants, a wallflower cousins, but just as long-blooming and easy to propagate. The wonderful faded shades of soft pink, apricot and cream set it apart from the crowd and make for a beautiful cut flower. It is a sport of ‘Apricot Twist’ and occasionally it sports back, producing tawny orange flowers on an occasional branch. Like ‘Apricot Twist’ it is too busy flowering to ever get very big. Take cuttings while the plant is still young, or cut it hard back in July to promote new growth and extend its life.

**Height/spread** 45–60cm x 45–60cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun, drainage.

**Hardiness** RHS H4, USDA 6a–9b.

**Origin** Southern Europe.

**Season of interest** May – September.

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**Height/spread** 45–60cm x 45–60cm.

**Growing conditions** Sun, drainage.

**Hardiness** RHS H4, USDA 6a–9b.

**Origin** Southern Europe.

**Season of interest** May – September.