



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.



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

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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 1-1.2m 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 'Lady Flora Hastings'

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.



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 H7, USDA 4a-7b.

Origin Hybrid of *A. major* x *A. maxima*.

Season of interest May – June, September.

*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, intense 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 H6, USDA 5a-9b.
Origin Southwest Europe.
Season of interest May, June and August.

Bunium bulbocastaneum
Bunium bulbocastaneum is also known as the earth chestnut, thanks to its small, crunchy tubers (pignuts), 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 it 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-8b.
Origin Europe and Asia.
Season of interest May – June.



Anthyllis vulneraria var.
coccinea '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* are 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 10cm.
Origin Europe.
Growing conditions Sun, good drainage.
Hardiness RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.
Season of interest May and June.

Allium cristophii
This stunning allium adds drama wherever it is planted – the individual florets 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 gilding 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-8b.
Origin Central Asia.
Season of interest May – August.



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-8b.
Origin Southern Europe.
Season of interest May – September.

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 gratifyingly, 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 Central Europe.
Season of interest May.



Places to visit

Derry shares some of her favourite places to see plants at their best.

Rowallane Garden is an enchanting, relaxed naturalistic garden in Northern Ireland. It features a garden built of natural rock outcrops, wild-flower meadows set in natural woodlands, and drifts of meconopsis. Many rare trees and shrubs, including the rhododendrons, azaleas and magnolias, are wonderful in spring. Open daily. Saintfield, County Down, Northern



Rowallane Garden

Ireland BT24 7LH. Tel 028 9751 0131, nationaltrust.org.uk/rowallane-garden

Hill House Nursery, Devon, is one of my favourite nurseries – a hidden treasure down narrow Devon lanes. A mild climate and lots of glasshouses mean they stock plants no one else grows. I come here to find tender treasures at incredibly good prices. There's a pleasant garden

and tea rooms attached, but it is the plants and friendly owners that make the journey worthwhile. Open daily 11am-4.45pm. Landscope, Devon TQ13 7LY. Tel 01803 762273, hillhousenursery.com

Abbey Garden on the Isles of Scilly is gorgeous at almost any time of year, but spectacular in spring. Frost rarely visits, so weird and wonderful plants thrive

here lending a fantastical atmosphere. Intensively gardened without being fussy. Come and dream. Open daily 10am-4pm. Tresco, Isles of Scilly TR24 0QQ. Tel 01720 424108, tresco.co.uk/what-to-do/abbey-garden

Broughton Grange was once owned by the doyen of society hostesses Lady Ottoline Morrell, and visited by the likes of Bertrand



Abbey Garden

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 Wednesdays 10am-4pm, May through September. Wykham Lane, Broughton, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX15 5DS. Tel 07791 747371, broughtongrange.com