

Hardy Geraniums

The European Geranium comes in lots of attractive forms and is tough, hardy and vigorous. It's very important not to confuse it with the more delicate South African Pelargonium, which is often wrongly called 'Geranium'.

Geraniums are tough; pelargoniums are tender. Geraniums prefer life in a border; pelargoniums are happy in a pot and, here in Scotland, need protection over winter.

A plant's correct full name tells us so much about it. I know gardening writers often get a lot of stick for 'lapsing' into Latin when we talk about plants, but Latin botanical terms help define a plant more accurately. Among other things, they may describe the growing conditions that best suit a species. A variety in the *Geranium pratense* group grows naturally in a meadow, so thrives in an open, sunny place, while *G. palustre*, a marsh geranium, prefers a damp spot. *G. sylvaticum* is a woodland plant, so is happy in a shady part of the garden. Other words sometimes give you a clue about the plants' appearance. *G. lucidum* has bright leaves, and you'd expect to have blood-red ones with *G. sanguineum*. So, when choosing a new plant at a garden centre, insist on being given its full name, not just its variety. It may look very appealing, but without having the correct name, you may not know whether it will do well in the spot you're planning for it.

As these botanical terms for geraniums show, there's a species for every part of the garden, from full sun to deep, damp shade. And you can choose from the wide range of size, leaf shape and colour available. Leaves might be finely divided, lobed and velvety, or notched and blotched. The leaves on *G. Clarkei*, *G. macrorrhizum* and *G. dalmatica* turn pink, yellow or crimson in the autumn as will other varieties after a hot, dry spell. *G. robertianum*, Herb Robert, has red stems and leaves if you grow it in a very dry place.

The colours are just as varied, ranging from the dark purple of *G. phaeum* 'Mourning Widow' to the white *G. sylvaticum* 'Album'. And, if you can stop it spreading everywhere, even in paving cracks, *G. 'Johnson's Blue'* rewards us with a long season of clear blue flowers. A cracking plant I can't resist having around the place!

Double flowered varieties are also quite common, like *G. pratense* 'Plenum Caeruleum' and *G. himalayense* 'Plenum'. Doubles like this have the added bonus of being sterile, so they don't have to put their energy into producing seed, and therefore have a good, long flowering season. But the precise colour of many of these varieties varies according to growing conditions. The TV gardener, Geoffrey Smith, tried to confirm the exact colour of *G. sanguineum* var. *striatum* while on Walney Island off the coast of Cumbria. After he had found 14 different shades, he gave up.

Geraniums are colonisers, and none will beat *G. procurrentes*, which will root from every node, or growing point. It spreads at breath-taking speed, swamping everything in its path, and with its boring purple flowers, it has no saving graces – so avoid it like the plague. But most other geraniums can be an asset. *G. macrorrhizum* varieties also spread and if you want to reclaim a weedy herbaceous border, they'll do it for you. I have planted some *G. phaeums* in a semi-wild bank under the willow tree that houses some bird feeders. They've self-seeded very well, and along with *Silene dioica*, Red Campion, have even managed to smother out those foulest of weeds, ground elder and creeping buttercup. I'm now waiting for them to beat the docks.

Another endearing virtue is that none of our normal pests – slugs, greenfly or rabbits – will touch geraniums. They are one of the very few plants that our ducks and geese ignore, so I have been able to stuff a new bed in an unfenced bit of the garden, and enjoy a fine drift of colour from the comfort of a deckchair. Interestingly, though not poisonous, geraniums seem to have no useful medicinal or culinary properties either.

As well as providing varieties for every type of garden, geraniums are the most forgiving of plants. When they spread too much in a bed, I find I have to divide them and move a clump somewhere else. And, believe it or not, you can do this at almost any time of year. Obviously, the best and right time is late summer after flowering. Cut down the growth, dig up the clump and saw it in half, or soak in water and pull the roots apart. Although best suited to a specific type of place, most geraniums will cope with almost any soil: they're one of those rare plants that don't need 'good, moist, free-draining soil'. So, save your precious compost for other deserving specimens.

While some geraniums are sterile, the majority have viable seeds, and they will hybridise freely, which is ideal for plant breeders. But we gardeners can get in on the act as well. By not weeding ruthlessly and allowing some seedlings to grow on, we give ourselves the chance and satisfaction of creating our own new variety. I live in hope.