

In brief

What A genus of about 300 species of perennial, annual and biennial plants with hundreds more cultivars and hybrids. Most of those featured here are descended from the perennial species *Delphinium elatum*.
Origin Throughout the northern hemisphere, mainly in China
Season Flowering in June and July with occasional re-flowering later in the year.
Size From 30cm to 2m tall.
Conditions Delphiniums enjoy a sunny, open situation, in well-drained soil, which has been prepared by adding well-rotted compost. In hot weather they will need regular watering. Established plants benefit from an annual top-dressing of a general fertiliser, and mulching helps to reduce water loss.



Delphinium

This one-time cottage-garden favourite has lately fallen out of fashion, but are these elaborate and statuesque plants due a revival?

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS ANNAÏCK GUITTENY

Delphinium 'Gemini'
 When buds open the flower spike is covered with neatly arranged bowl-shaped, pale lavender flowers that bleeds into a darker lavender at the edges of the petals. The bee-like brown centre has a velvety texture. 1.6m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b†.



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In 1936 the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged one of its more improbable exhibitions: a display of delphiniums. The plants had been bred by Edward Steichen, at the time a celebrated photographer and chief of photography for Condé Nast publications. Steichen's private passion was the breeding of new forms of delphiniums, and the curators at MoMA saw in his work a creative process and an artistry that was worthy of their galleries. Visitors to the exhibition reportedly responded with awe and amazement to the beauty and the stature of the plants.

The sense of wonder when presented with stands of porcelain-like delphiniums will be familiar to anyone who has visited the Chelsea Flower Show. As a lanky youth on my first visit to the show I was amazed by a dazzling display of delphiniums standing proudly in serried ranks. Grown with immense skill, they were regal and opulent, and at subsequent Chelsea shows I've always gone to visit them, to marvel as a pilgrim and to bend a knee at the altar of horticultural prowess.

In the wild, delphiniums are mainly northern hemisphere plants, with just a few species growing south of the equator in Africa. Their greatest density is in southern China where around 60 of the 300 known species are found. Very few of the species have been used in the breeding of modern garden delphiniums, which can be placed into three groups. The Belladonna Group are a range of delphiniums about 90cm tall. First bred in the 1850s, they are now mainly grown to be used as cut-flowers. The Grandiflora Group are generally 30cm-50cm tall with clusters of flowers at the end of short, wiry stems. The third is the group featured here, the largest and most eye-catching group and the subject of that MoMA display, which are mainly descended from *Delphinium elatum*, a species found in the Alps.

Plant breeders and gardeners are attracted to *Delphinium elatum* cultivars and hybrids ▸

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

▷ because they are much taller and have many more flowers than other species. The colour range encompasses purples, mauves, blues, pinks and whites, with single and double flowers, often with contrasting eyes. The first *D. elatum* cultivars were produced by French nurseryman Victor Lemoine in the 19th century, followed in Britain by James Kelway, and later, through to the middle of the 20th century, by Charles Langdon and John Blackmore, whose nursery is still a major producer of delphiniums and whose Chelsea display attracts so much attention. Delphinium breeding continues today. As well as wanting to extend the colour range and the flower shape of delphiniums, plant breeders strive to produce plants that are sturdy, resistant to disease, long-lived and with flowers that have a clear colour that is not subject to fading or spotting.

Propagating these named delphinium cultivars has to be done by taking cuttings and is a slow and labour-intensive process that can never provide sufficient plants for the mass market. While breeders in Europe have been focused on producing named cultivars, in the USA delphinium growers turned their attention to cultivars that could be grown from seed. In the 1930s the Californian nursery of Vetterle and Reinelt launched what it called the Pacific Hybrid strains of delphinium that grew to about 1.5m-2m tall and which often produced flowers the same year the seed was sown. The benefit of the seed-grown cultivars was that nurseries could supply large numbers of plants that were uniform in size and colour, even if they were not identical to each other. The plants were named after characters from English mythology and many are still available.

Delphiniums are no longer the popular plant they were in the early 20th century. They do not sit well in the loose, naturalistic style of planting. Their need to be staked, and their dislike of summer drought, means that they demand to be more fussed over than many gardeners have time for. The genus flourishes in plant societies and gardening clubs where enthusiastic amateurs continue to breed new hybrids and safeguard old ones, invaluable work ensuring delphiniums will be around when designers and gardeners rediscover their matchless beauty.

• John's recommendations for delphiniums continue over the next six pages.



Delphinium 'Nimrod'

The intense, deep royal purple of the sepals (see Flower structure page 59) is accentuated by the flowers' white eye. The flower spikes are less dense than those of other cultivars. 2.2m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Summerfield Oberon'

A cultivar with flower spikes that are fat at the base, giving it a conical flower shape. It is a tall plant that has to be staked to support the weight of the flower. 2.2m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Michael Ayres'

A vigorous cultivar that resists mildew better than most. The gently tapering flower spikes are composed of flowers with deep-blue outer sepals and purple inner ones. 1.8m. AGM*. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Langdon's Orpheus'

A cultivar bred by Blackmore & Langdons with unusual, pale-mauve flowers that are smudged with blue, giving a pastel two-tone effect. The flower spikes are narrow and tubular. 1.6m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Faust'

A vigorous and long-lived cultivar that produces masses of slender blooms made up of semi-double ultramarine flowers. Despite the plant's strong stems it always needs staking. 2.2m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Amadeus'

The tubular flower spikes are packed with large, flat flowers and have dark-blue sepals that are overlaid with purple to create a shimmering effect. The central eye of the flower is brown. 1.5m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Vanessa Mae'

An unusual form that has mauve flowers, edged in blue. On some flowers as they age the blue marking becomes more prominent and on some petals appears as a bold stripe. 1.5m. USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Mighty Atom'

An old cultivar with very long, slender blooms of large, semi-double violet flowers. Although it is a vigorous plant, producing many flowers, it is very susceptible to mildew. 1.65m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Cassius'

Unusual flowers that have blue outer sepals that and inner ones that are deep mauve colour with a blue central stripe. As the season progresses that mauve colour fades to blue. 1.7m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Blue Tit'

A dwarf cultivar bred by Blackmore & Langdons with dark-purple sepals that have a deep-blue stripe down the middle, giving the flowers the look of lapis lazuli. 1.1m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Loch Leven'
One of a series of delphiniums raised in the 1960s by amateur breeder Tom Cowan. The slightly ruffled sepals are sky blue and the flowers are densely packed along the stem 1.65m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Fenella'
A vigorous and long-lived cultivar that was introduced in 1960 with smaller flowers than is usual but which seem to last far longer. The gentian-blue sepals surround a black centre. 1.5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Shimmer'
The deep-blue sepals and the back of the buds are streaked down their centre with mauve, creating a two-tone effect that makes the flowers appear – as the name suggests – to shimmer. 1.8m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Cupid'
Short, fat spikes of sky-blue flowers that have been brushed with mauve at the base of the sepals. Being short, it does not need staking and can stand up to wind better than most delphiniums. 1m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Dora Larkan'
Densely packed flower spikes of sky-blue flowers that have pointed sepals and a white butterfly-shaped centre. Named for a stalwart of the Delphinium Society. 2m. USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Loch Nevis'
Ruffled, sky-blue flowers with a white eye on a branching plant. A frequent prize winner at flower shows and a cultivar that has been used by delphinium enthusiasts in breeding programmes. 1.8m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. Blue Jade Group
Soft, pastel-blue flowers that are deeply concave. Nestled deep in the centre is a chocolate-coloured eye. Relatively short but strong stems make it popular with cut-flower growers. 1.2m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Pericles'
Clear, pale-blue sepals that have no hints of red or purple in them. The flowers are formed from a double row of sepals that stand away from each other. 1.7m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Trudy'
The flowers are palest blue with a delicate lilac sheen on the petals that gives the flowers a soft look. The flower spikes are about 40cm, shorter than most but nevertheless this is a beautiful plant. 1.5m. USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'China Blue'
Introduced by amateur delphinium enthusiast Bob Carvill in 2005, this has quickly become a popular plant. The flower spikes are 70cm tall and the plant grows to 2m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.

Flower structure

The protective covering of a plant's flower buds are known as sepals. These are usually green and in most plants they drop away when the flower opens. In delphiniums the sepals expand and form the colourful, flamboyant part of the flower. The sepals of delphiniums are commonly referred to as petals, but the actual petals are those small parts of the flower, usually brown or white, that form the central eye of a delphinium's flower.

Pest and diseases

- In general, delphiniums do not suffer from any more pests and diseases than the usual range of herbaceous perennial plants. However, the new shoots of the plant are as soft and tender as a mollusc could wish for, and even a single snail can wreak havoc in a clump of delphiniums. The most disheartening harm done by slugs and snails, though, is when they climb until they reach a suitably easy-to-munch point of the stem and damage it to such an extent that the flower spike, often full of promise, topples over. There are lots of organic and inorganic methods of slug control, with many delphinium enthusiasts opting for copper barriers. Whichever method of control you opt for, it is important to begin it as soon as the delphiniums start into growth.

- Delphiniums are susceptible to powdery mildew, particularly in hot dry summers. Although this does not kill the plant the fungus will weaken it. Thinning congested clumps to increase air circulation around the foliage and burning any infected foliage may help to reduce the occurrence of the problem.

Staking

Delphinium enthusiasts who grow delphiniums competitively tend to support each individual plant with a tall, bamboo cane but in the garden these can look ugly and obtrusive. Just as effective are semi-circular

metal supports inserted into the soil around the plants when they are about 30cm tall. I have also seen hazel woven into supportive framework among the foliage. This is attractive and discreet but requires access to hazel and the skills of a weaver. Whatever form of staking you choose, do not tie the stems directly on to the support as this can result in the stems snapping.

Where to see

- Godinton House**
 Godinton Lane, Ashford, Kent TN23 3BP.
 Tel 01233 643854, godintonhouse.co.uk
 Hosts Delphinium Week, 23 June – 2 July, organised by the Delphinium Society (delphinium-society.co.uk)
- Temple Newsam Estate**
 Temple Newsam Road, off Selby Road, Leeds LS15 0AE.
 Tel 0113 336 7560, leeds.gov.uk
 National collection holder.
- Queen Mary's Garden**
 The Regent's Park, London NW1 4NR.
 Tel 0300 061 2300, royalparks.org.uk
 National collection holder.
 Delphiniums are planted in a large, semi-circular border near Jubilee Gate.

Where to buy

- Blackmore & Langdons**
 Stanton Nursery, Pensford, Bristol BS39 4JL.
 Tel 01275 332300, blackmore-langdon.com
- Home Farm Plants**
 Home Farm, Shantock Lane, Bovingdon, Hertfordshire HP3 0NG.
 Tel 07773 798068, homefarmplants.co.uk
- Larkspur Nursery**
 Online delphinium seed supplier.
 larkspur-nursery.co.uk
- Newport Mills Nursery**
 Wrantage, Taunton TA3 6DJ.
 Tel 01823 490231, newportmillsnursery.net



D. 'Sandpiper'
 The combination of dazzling white flowers and a black eye make an elegant flower. This cultivar has a reputation for being susceptible to frost damage so may be unsuitable for cold gardens. 1.2m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Winnifred Tym'
 A really good form with white flowers that are free from a green or blue tinge and that are enhanced by having a white centre. The sepals have a slightly ruffled edge. 1.6m. USDA 7b-8a



D. 'Dunsden Green'
 A vigorous plant that produces lots of creamy-white flowers that have a pronounced green hue. The flowers have a double row of sepals, creating an open centre with the carpels exposed. 1.5m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Sungleam'
 Large creamy-white florets with a primrose-yellow eye. In the evening sun the flowers take on a primrose yellow sheen. Has been used to breed cultivars with buttery-yellow flowers. 1.5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Conspicuous'
 The pastel lavender-blue flowers have a chocolate-coloured eye and are loosely arranged on the stem, giving the impression of a light and airy plant. 1.5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Spindrift'
 An early flowering cultivar that was introduced in the 1970s. The flowers have a pastel blue base overlaid with lavender with, occasionally, a green sheen on the sepals. 1.7m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Fanfare'
 Pastel lavender-blue flowers that are a similar colour to D. 'Conspicuous' but have a white eye. The flowers are tightly packed along the stem, creating a dense flower spike. 1.7m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Summerfield Diana'
 A popular plant bred by delphinium experts David and Shirley Basset, the pale pink flowers have a lavender sheen on the petals. It flowers later than most cultivars. 1.5m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Garden Party'
 The flowers keep their solid, pale-pink colour and do not fade as they age. Although the flower spikes are only around 70cm tall, the plant can grow to a height of 2m. 2m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.



D. 'Rosemary Brock'
 A dusky pink cultivar bred by David and Shirley Basset. It produces lots of shoots, making it easy to propagate and so is more widely available than other hybrids. 1.6m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-7b.

MANY THANKS TO GODINTON HOUSE IN KENT WHERE THESE IMAGES WERE TAKEN.