

### In brief

**What** A genus of 420 species of hardy annuals and perennials valued for their adaptability, their ease of cultivation and their abundant flower production. Thousands of cultivars and hybrids have been bred.

**Origins** Geraniums are found in every continent apart from Antarctica, mainly in temperate regions. Common in woodlands and open meadows, they have also adapted to shallow soils and freezing temperatures at high altitudes.

**Season** Mainly summer-flowering, from May to September.

**Size** From small alpines 10cm tall to herbaceous perennials 1.2m tall.

**Conditions** A few species prefer cool, shady conditions but most thrive in sunny, open situations in rich, well-drained soil.

# Hardy geraniums

They may have been known by only a handful of plant enthusiasts 60 years ago, but today cranesbills are hugely popular and suited to many kinds of garden

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS DIANNA JAZWINSKI

### GERANIUM ROZANNE (= 'GERWAT')

A mass of flowers from June to October. G. Rozanne was found in Rozanne Waterer's Somerset garden in 1989. Once established, it forms a wide, neat clump. 50cm. AGM\*. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b†.



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Sixty years ago Margery Fish's book *We Made a Garden* was first published and it became an instant success with amateur gardeners. In it, she recounted how over the previous 20 years, she and her husband had developed their Somerset garden. She introduced her readers to plants such as astrantias, euphorbias and geraniums, which at the time were only known to small groups of plant enthusiasts. Fish was very forthright (and occasionally imperious) in expressing her opinions and her championing of hardy geraniums was unequivocal. She would later, famously, advise: 'When in doubt, plant a geranium.'

A lot of us must have taken her advice because today geraniums are one of the most popular herbaceous perennials. At the centennial Chelsea Flower Show in 2013, visitors voted *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat') as Plant of the Centenary.

The fondness that gardeners have for the genus is not, of course, entirely due to the bossy Mrs Fish. Geraniums are easy to grow and generally adaptable, with species that are at home in the cool comfort of woodlands while others thrive in the baking harshness of screes. In addition, the loose and relaxed character of geraniums fits well with the informal planting styles that have dominated gardens for the past 60 years.

The popularity of geraniums and the commercial success of *Geranium Rozanne* (pictured left) has spurred on nurseries and plant breeders to introduce many new cultivars and hybrids. Some are launched with the razzmatazz of a sophisticated marketing campaign while others appear quietly in the catalogues of specialist nurseries. Sorting out the wheat from the chaff only happens after we have grown a plant for a few years. Already some recent introductions, including the examples featured on these pages, are beginning

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

▷ to show that they are worthy of a space in our gardens.

*Geranium Rozanne* was found as a seedling in a Somerset garden at the end of the 1980s and produces large blue flowers with a white eye from June to October. One of its parents is thought to be a form of *Geranium wallichianum*, and breeders have been looking to see if this species can provide a successful sibling to Rozanne. *G. wallichianum* 'Havana Blues' (see facing page) has flowers of a similar blue with dark purple veins on each petal. *G. 'Rainbow'* (page 62), another *G. wallichianum* cultivar, has large, blue flowers with pink tones at the base of the petals. Unusually, *G. wallichianum* 'Sylvia's Surprise' (page 61), which appeared in the Welsh garden of the eponymous Sylvia, has pink flowers. All three have the sprawling habit and long-flowering period of the species.

Breeders have also mined *G. cinereum* as a source of cultivars and as a parent in interesting hybrids. This European native alpine forms a neat hummock of foliage that is covered in small flowers in late spring and early summer. Cultivars tend to have pink, deep-red or magenta flowers and all need sunshine and well-drained soil.

Most new introductions are chance seedlings but some are the result of breeding programmes. In Orkney, off the northeastern coast of Scotland, Alan Bremner has introduced many excellent geranium hybrids that have proved their value in the garden over the past 25 years. He has made thousands of cross pollinations of which few produce flowering plants and only a score have been sufficiently different to be named.

Sometimes new hybrids are marketed as improvements of existing plants. *G. 'Eureka Blue'* is a vigorous plant that develops a 1m-tall mound of large, blue flowers, much larger than its parent *G. 'Orion'* (page 63), which was itself a seedling of *G. 'Brookside'*. I still grow *G. 'Brookside'*. Whether you go for the latest hybrid or stick with the older examples is a matter of personal preference. Many new introductions are certainly exciting plants: Margery Fish would not be disappointed.

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



**GERANIUM CINEREUM 'SOPHIE'**

A compact dome with large (2.5cm diameter) flowers mainly in May and June and sporadically thereafter. Will grow in sun or part shade but needs good drainage, especially in winter. 15cm. USDA 4a-9b.



**G. 'LILAC ICE'**

Plantsman Michael Steggles spotted this growing in a batch of *G. Rozanne*. It has delicate, pale-lilac flowers from June to September and looks good at dusk, when the flowers seem to glow. 40cm.



**G. WALLICHIANUM 'ROSETTA'**

Deep-pink flowers with magenta veins on this selection made by Dutch nurseryman Hans Kramer. It flowers from mid-June through to September. 40cm (60cm spread). USDA 5a-8b.



**G. CINEREUM 'ALICE'**

Probably the largest flowers of a *G. cinereum* cultivar over evergreen foliage. Flowers profusely in July and again in September. It was introduced by the Devon nursery Border Alpines. 15cm. USDA 4a-9b.



**G. WALLICHIANUM 'HAVANA BLUES'**

This is much more compact than most *G. wallichianum* cultivars. It flowers from the end of June through to September and its bright-blue flowers have distinct magenta veins on the petals. 35cm. USDA 5a-9b.



**G. 'SIRAK'**  
Lucent, lilac-pink flowers in June and July and then again towards the end of August as the temperature drops. It will grow in part shade as well as full sun. 50cm. AGM. USDA 5a-8b.



**G. CINEREUM 'SIGNAL'**  
A cultivar raised in Germany in the 1990s. It forms a neat dome of evergreen foliage that has a silvery-grey sheen. The bright magenta flowers also have a silvery tinge. 15cm. USDA 4a-9b.



**G. 'IVAN'**  
'Ivan' is a big, muscular plant that grows tall and has startlingly bright magenta flowers. Its main flowering is during June and July with a few flowers later in the year if the whole plant is cut back. 1m. AGM. RHS H7.



**G. CINEREUM 'CAROL'**  
Another new *G. cinereum* cultivar that starts blooming in June and continues on and off through the summer. Flowers best when given some shade from the midday sun. 15cm (25cm spread). USDA 4a-9b.



**G. NODOSUM 'CLOS DE COUDRAY'**  
The flowers, with rosy-purple petals that are delicately edged in white, are held on wiry stems above the plant's glossy foliage. Needs shady, woodland conditions. 25cm (35cm spread).



**G. DRAGON HEART (= 'BREMDRA')**  
Large, 4cm-wide, magenta flowers with a black centre and veining are produced in great abundance from June to September. 50cm (80cm spread). RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.



**G. 'TINY MONSTER'**  
A vigorous, sprawling geranium with vivid pink flowers that have slightly ruffled petals. The main flowering is in May and June with a second wave in late summer. 45cm (60cm spread). USDA 5a-9b.



**G. 'TANYA RENDALL'**  
'Tanya Rendall' makes an attractive ground cover of olive-green leaves covered with an abundance of dark-pink flowers in June and July. 15cm (50cm spread). USDA 6a-9b.



**G. WALLICHIANUM 'SYLVIA'S SURPRISE'**  
An eye-catching cultivar with vivid pink flowers that are up to 3.5cm wide and first appear in early summer and then sporadically until the end of autumn. Needs well-drained soil. 40cm. USDA 4a-8b.



**G. CINEREUM 'MELODY'**  
Of the recent *G. cinereum* cultivars, this is the one with flowers closest to red. Foliage is evergreen and leaves have a silvery sheen. Flowers in May and is sporadic until September. 15cm. USDA 4a-9b.

### Cultivation

Most geraniums are robust and resilient plants that do not require special growing conditions other than fertile soil and a sunny situation. *G. cinereum* cultivars need good drainage and thrive in raised beds. *Geranium phaeum*, *G. maculatum* and *G. nodosum* are woodland plants and need shade. They suffer from mildew in very dry conditions. If this happens, the best solution is to cut the foliage back to a few centimetres from the ground.

Geraniums measuring more than 30cm tall tend to flop over and become unsightly after flowering. Cutting the plant down will produce a new flush of foliage and usually a second burst of flowers. Don't be half-hearted about cutting back. Take a pair of shears and chop the whole plant back to about 10cm from the ground.

### What's in a name?

Plants in the related genus of *Pelargonium* are also popularly referred to as 'geraniums', which often leads to confusion. As long ago as 1901 *The Gardeners' Chronicle* was bemoaning the fact that 'the average gardener speaks of geraniums when he means pelargoniums'. The famous botanist Carl Linnaeus grouped geraniums with erodiums and pelargoniums into the single genus *Geranium*, but during the 19th century these were separated into distinct groups and given names that related to the shape of their seedpods. Resembling the beak of a heron, erodiums acquired their name from the Greek word for heron (*erodíós*) while geranium's seeds evoke the beak of a crane (*geranós*).

*Pelargós*, the Greek word for stork, provided the name for the final group, whose seedpods suggest the stout bill of this other long-legged bird. Vernacular names of cranesbill, heronsbill and storksbill are still used to describe each group. The important difference is in the shape of the flower: geraniums have five equally sized and regularly arranged petals, whereas the flowers on pelargoniums have two upper and three lower petals.

## Where to see

- **Cambridge University Botanic Garden**  
1 Brookside, Cambridge CB2 1JE.  
Tel 01223 336265, botanic.cam.ac.uk
- **Susan Clarke** (*Geranium sylvaticum* and *renardii*) Wrens Nest, Wrenbury Heath Road, Wrenbury, Nantwich, Cheshire CW5 8EQ.  
Tel 01270 780704.
- **Mrs J Purkiss** (*Geranium phaeum*)  
1 Sycamore Close, Whitehaven, Cumbria CA28 6LE.  
Tel 01946 695831.
- **Dr M E Stone** (*Geranium sanguineum*, *macrorrhizum* and *cantabrigiense*) Brockamin, Old Hills, Callow End, Worcestershire WR2 4TQ.  
Tel 01905 830370.
- **Mrs J Taylor** (*Geranium nodosum*) Silverwood House, Gardeners Lane, Romsey, Hampshire SO51 6AD.  
Tel 023 8081 4345, birchwoodplants.co.uk

## Where to buy

- **Ashwood Nurseries**  
Ashwood Lower Lane, Kingswinford, West Midlands DY6 0AE.  
Tel 01384 401996, ashwoodnurseries.com
  - **The Beth Chatto Gardens**  
Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex CO7 7DB.  
Tel 01206 822007, bethchatto.co.uk
  - **Cranesbill Nursery**  
1 Waverley Road, Mossley Estate, Bloxwich, Walsall WS3 2SW.  
Tel 01684 770733, cranesbillnursery.com
  - **Fairweather's Garden Centre**  
High Street, Beaulieu, Hampshire SO42 7YB.  
Tel 01590 612307, fairweathers.co.uk
  - **The Plantsman's Preference**  
Church Road, South Lopham, Diss, Norfolk IP22 2LW.  
Tel 07799 855559, plantpref.co.uk
- The Hardy Plant Society has a group devoted to geranium enthusiasts.  
hardy-plant.org.uk/geranium/



**G. 'TERRE FRANCHE'**

Similar to 'Philippe Vapelle', which like this is bred from *G. renardii*. Its grey-green, velvety leaves form an attractive dome, and the purple flowers have beautiful blue veins that are outlined in red. 50cm. USDA 5a-9b.



**G. 'SWEET HEIDY'**

A new introduction that the breeders claim is the result of a quest to produce a plant to rival *G. Rozanne*. The size and habit are similar to its competitor; flowers are lavender-blue. 50cm. USDA 5a-8b.



**G. 'FAY ANNA'**

The new foliage emerges an unexpected pink-flushed gold and matures to an olive-green before becoming flaming red and bronze in the autumn. The pale lilac flowers appear from June to August. 30cm.



**G. 'RAINBOW'**

The blue background of the petals merges with purple veining and a pink hue at the base of the petals to create an unusual effect – not quite a rainbow but attractive nonetheless. 38cm. USDA 4a-8b.



**G. 'ORION'**

'Orion' appeared in Holland in the late 1990s as a seedling from the popular *G. 'Brookside'*. The luminous lavender-blue flowers are 5cm wide and cover the plant in June and then again in August. 80cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 3a-9b.

MANY THANKS TO JOHN DUKES, THE FORMER OWNER OF CRANESBILL NURSERY AND TO PATRICK FAIRWEATHER OF FAIRWEATHER'S GARDEN CENTRE WHERE THESE IMAGES WERE TAKEN.