

### In brief

**What** A genus of at least 70 species of annual, biennial and herbaceous plants.

**Origins** Mainly northern hemisphere plants, including within the Arctic Circle, with a few species found in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Season** Summer flowering.

**Size** Alpine species grow to just 10cm tall and some *Papaver orientale* cultivars will reach 1.2m tall.

**Conditions** Specific growing conditions vary with the species but in general *Papaver* need open, sunny situations and well-drained soil.

# Papaver

The scarlet field poppy is recognisable as a symbol of remembrance, but with more than 70 species of *Papaver*, in a range of shapes and colours, there's one for every occasion

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS ANNAÏCK GUITTENY

*Papaver commutatum* 'Ladybird'  
Similar to the common field poppy, this has smaller, bowl-shaped flowers that are an intense scarlet. The black blotches at the base of the petals make this an eye-catching plant. 40cm. AGM\*. RHS H5, USDA 1-11†.



**John Hoyland** is a plantsman and garden writer who has gardens in both southeast England and southwest France.

Few flowers are as widely recognised as the poppy and people with little knowledge of plants will generally be able to identify one. In part this is due to its tenacious presence both in rural lanes and fields and on waste land and verges in towns. Mainly, though, it is the poppy's status as an emblem of remembrance that has ensured it is deeply embedded in our psyches.

The fragility of the flowers and ephemeral nature of the field poppy make it a perfect symbol of mourning and remembering. A far less benign influence on humanity is found in another poppy, the source of opium. These two extremes are reflected in the wide range of the genus, which encompasses species whose flowers are elegant and fragile, while others produce flowers that are burly and flamboyant.

*Papaver* is made up of at least 70 species of annuals, biennials and perennials, growing mainly in the northern hemisphere, including within the Arctic Circle, with one species found in southern Africa. They are part of the *Papaveraceae* family, which includes other genera commonly referred to as poppies, including *Meconopsis* (the blue poppy) and *Eschscholzia* (the Californian poppy).

The common field poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, is widespread in Europe and north Africa, usually flowering from late May until the end of July. Typically scarlet, in the wild occasional colour variations appear, and in 1880 a botanising vicar, the Rev W Wilks, found a single red flower with a narrow, white edge around the petals. He selected seedlings that had no black blotching but that retained the white edge and named this the Shirley poppy after his Surrey parish of Shirley.

Several other selections of *P. rhoeas* have been made. After the Second World War the artist and gardener Sir Cedric Morris scoured the Suffolk countryside for variations in the native poppy and eventually produced a range with a smoky-grey sheen on the petals. More recently, Thompson & Morgan has

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

▷ developed a seed strain of semi-double flowers, the Mother of Pearl Group, in mainly pastel colours. All of the seed strains produce the occasional bright-red flowers and their progeny will be unpredictable, especially when grown near other forms of *P. rhoeas*.

The opium poppy, *P. somniferum*, is equally unrestrained in its ability to produce seedlings in a dazzling array of colours and shapes. In the wild the plant is about 1m tall, with glaucous foliage and white or purple flowers. Cultivated plants tend to retain a blue-grey sheen on the leaves but most standard flowers tend to be a muddy pinkish-purple colour. Dozens of cultivars have been bred, ranging from the deep-maroon flowers of *P. somniferum* 'Black Beauty' to the glistening white of 'White Cloud'. Some flowers are fully double (the Paeoniiflorum Group) with a mass of crumpled petals resembling a peony. Others (the Laciniatum Group) have fringed or lacerated petals. A drift of opium poppies is an arresting sight and even the gaudier cultivars have a place in bold planting schemes.

The most widely grown perennial is *P. orientale*, whose typically blousy flowers have made it popular in exuberant planting designs. Most cultivars were bred in Britain in the early 20th century, particularly by nurseryman Amos Perry. A second wave of interest later in the century saw new cultivars from German and Dutch breeders. Many of Perry's plants are unsurpassed by later cultivars, particularly *P. orientale* 'Perry's White' (see right) and 'Indian Chief', which has large flowers of a deep-mahogany-red on strong stems. In general, the oriental poppies are taller than other poppies (75cm to 1m tall) with larger and more vibrant flowers.

The trend in breeding new oriental poppies has been towards extravagant flowers. *P. orientale* 'Miss Piggy', for example, has enormous (25cm wide), pale-pink flowers with tasselled petals. Although red or orange flamboyant flowers dominate there are more demure cultivars. *P. orientale* 'Karine', bred by Countess von Zeppelin in the 1970s, is a floriferous selection with modest, pale-salmon-pink flowers. Whether your taste veers towards the ostentatious, or you are happy with simplicity, there's a poppy for you.

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

## *Papaver orientale*



***Papaver orientale* 'Beauty of Livermere'**  
Shiny, blood-red flowers that are 20cm wide on tall stems make this an outstanding plant. It is often grown from seed, resulting in paler flowers or shorter plants. 1.2m. RHS H7, USDA 3a-7b.



***P. orientale* 'Perry's White'**  
One of many oriental poppies bred by the Edwardian nurseryman Amos Perry. The petals are ruffled and overlap, and each one has a deep pink stain at the base. 85cm. RHS H7, USDA 6a.



***P. orientale* 'Cedric Morris'**  
A popular cultivar among people who dislike the more strident colours of oriental poppies. Bred by the eponymous Suffolk artist, it is a rounded, compact plant that is very floriferous. 70cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 6a.



***P. orientale* 'Fornett Summer'**  
Eye-catching, bright-salmon-pink flowers with an irregularly shaped fringe along the edge of the petals. Difficult to place, it looks stunning against the dark leaves of cannas. 75cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-9b.



***P. orientale* 'Patty's Plum'**  
Found growing on the compost heap of the Mrs Patricia Marrow in the 1980s, its dusky plum-coloured flowers caused a sensation when the plant was first introduced. The flowers keep their colour best when grown in partial shade. 80cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-7b.



**Papaver somniferum seedling**  
In the wild the opium poppy has variable flowers, ranging from white to deep purple. Garden-sown seedlings can exhibit an even wider range of colours and flower shapes, including, as shown here, double flowers. All have the same glaucous foliage. 1m. RHS H5, USDA 1-11.

## Papaver somniferum



**P. somniferum 'Swansdown'**  
Creamy-white flowers with a shaggy look created by the deeply lacerated margins of the petals. Forms with this kind of fringed petals are sometimes referred to as Carnation poppies. 1m. RHS H5, USDA 1a-10a.



**Papaver somniferum 'Cherry Glow'**  
The deep scarlet petals have a polished surface, which gives the flower its lustrous quality, further enhanced by the smoky blotches at its base. 80cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.



**Papaver somniferum 'Candy Floss'**  
The sumptuous, peony-like, pale-lilac flowers can grow up to 10cm wide. Recently introduced by Thompson & Morgan, this cultivar was originally bred for the cut-flower market. 1m. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.



**P. somniferum 'Lauren's Grape'**  
A cultivar that comes reliably true from saved seed if no other forms are grown nearby. The single, bowl-shaped flowers are the deepest purple and grow up to 10cm wide. 90cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

### Cultivation

- The annual poppies are among the easiest plants to raise from seed. Most do not like the disturbance caused by transplanting so are best sown in the spring in the place where you want them to flower.
- Overcrowding will produce weedy plants so sow seed thinly and be ruthless in removing seedlings to ensure the plants you are left with have the space to flourish.
- Annual poppies prefer an open, sunny aspect in well-drained, relatively poor soil but will adapt to any soil that is not waterlogged. They will not grow well in deep shade. All produce copious amounts of seed and most will self-seed, although it is a bit of a lottery what colour the flowers of named cultivars of *P. somniferum* and of *P. rhoeas* will be.
- The perennial species tend to be more demanding than the annual ones and although in the wild *P. orientale* grows in poor, rocky soil or in meadows with thin soil, to perform well in the garden the plant needs rich, well-drained soil. Too much moisture and the crown of the plant will rot; too poor a soil and it will not flower.
- After flowering you are left with tatty foliage. The renowned designer Gertrude Jekyll advised hiding it with a scrambling plant, such as *Lathyrus latifolius*, but *P. orientale* can be cut down to the ground, which will encourage fresh, healthy looking leaves as well as the occasional second flowering.

### Culinary uses

As long ago as 2700 BCE the Minoans, a sophisticated civilisation based around Crete, are known to have cultivated poppies for their seed. Culinary poppy seed is derived mainly from the opium poppy *P. somniferum*, although the ripe seed has negligible narcotic properties. The seeds are a source

of minerals, calcium and iron and in Eastern Europe are used extensively in breads and pastries. In the Balkans a children's treat is a biscuit made with boiled poppy seeds and honey. Poppy seeds are also used in Indian cuisine, where many recipes call for seeds, often ground into a paste to be used as a thickening agent. In China, Taiwan and Singapore the seeds are banned because of their potential to be used to grow opium poppies and even food containing the seeds is prohibited.

### Further reading

- *Poppies: The Poppy Family in the Wild and in Cultivation* by Christopher Grey-Wilson (Batsford, 2005). A comprehensive selection of members of the *Papaver* genus, as well as plants we have come to know as poppies.
- *Poppy* by Andrew Lack (Reaktion Books, 2016). Explores the history and the horticulture of poppies, their use in art and its symbolism.

### Where to buy

- **Beth Chatto Gardens**  
Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex CO7 7DB.  
Tel 01206 822007, bethchatto.co.uk
- **Chiltern Seeds**  
Crowmarsh Battle Barns, 114 Preston Crowmarsh, Wallingford, Oxfordshire OX10 6SL.  
Tel 01491 824675, chilternseeds.co.uk
- **Cotswold Garden Flowers**  
Sands Lane, Badsey, Evesham, Worcestershire WR11 7EZ.  
Tel 01386 422829, cgf.net
- **Plant World Seeds**  
St Marychurch Road, Newton Abbot, Devon TQ12 4SE.  
Tel 01803 872939, plant-world-seeds.com

### Reader offer

Readers can enjoy a 20% discount on poppies and other seeds from Chiltern Seeds. See page 121 for details.



***P. rupifragum***

A perennial species from southern Spain that has adapted well to northern gardens. Flowers for several weeks in early summer and often self-seeds. Several double-flowered forms available. 45cm. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.



***P. rhoeas* 'Bridal Silk'**

The common field poppy has always thrown up the occasional white flower but this is a stable seed strain that reliably produces white flowers with the look of crumpled silk. 35cm. USDA 1a-11.



***P. nudicaule* 'Pacino'**

A neat dome of grey-green foliage on small flower stems. Disliking winter wet, it grows well in gravel. Some nurseries still sell it under its previous name: *P. miyabeana* 'Pacino'. 15cm. RHS H7, USDA 6a.



***P. nudicaule* Pulcinella Series**

A seed mix noted for producing plants with long-lasting, large flowers in vibrant colours, mainly bright oranges and fiery reds. Single-colour seed packets are occasionally sold. 40cm. RHS H7, USDA 2a-8b.



***P. nudicaule* Gartenzwerg Group**  
Sometimes known as the Garden Gnome Group, this dwarf strain produces flowers in a range of reds, pinks, yellows, oranges and white. A short-lived perennial, almost always grown as an annual for use as a cut-flower. 30cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 6a.