



Species pelargoniums

Species plants and primary hybrids have a delicacy that is far removed from the blowsy blooms normally associated with the *Pelargonium* genus

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In brief

What A genus of tender plants, usually long-flowering and floriferous, that are the progenitors of the colourful 'bedding geraniums'.

Origin Most species are found in southern Africa, with a few in east Africa, Australasia and the islands of Madagascar, Saint Helena and Tristan de Cunha. Two are from the Middle East.

Season April to October. In general a long-flowering genus and many species will flower for six months of the year.

Size From a few centimetres to a couple of metres.

Conditions Most need well-drained soil and prefer an open, sunny situation.

Hardiness Frost tender. In Britain most species will need to overwinter in a coldframe or unheated greenhouse.

Pelargonium 'Ardens'

A popular primary hybrid first raised in 1810. Sprays of flowers, so intensely red they appear to glow, are produced at the end of long stems. Best in part shade. 35cm. AGM*. RHS H1C, USDA 10a-11†.



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Gardeners are always on the lookout for something new. Every year 'improved' forms of old favourites or strange hybrids in unexpected colours are introduced. In the rush for novelty, species plants, the wild ancestors of garden hybrids, are often overlooked. When I was taking my first, tentative, steps down the gardening path in the 1970s, I remember a nurseryman asking why I would be interested in species plants, which were all 'dull and weedy', when I could have colourful modern hybrids. Had I been more articulate (and know what I now know) I would have replied that species plants have a robustness often lacking in their descendants and that their simple flowers have an elegance lost in breeding hybrids. In the past couple of decades garden designers have also realised that species plants combine well with other plants to create a more natural look in the garden.

The difference between a species plant and a hybrid can be so huge that the two look unrelated. This gap is probably greatest between the gaudy flowers of hybrid pelargoniums (the popular 'bedding geraniums') and the subtle allure of the wild forms of the genus. There will always be a place for blowsy plants in my garden, but the discreet charm of species plants is much more welcome.

There are about 17,000 pelargonium cultivars, all derived from just a few of the 280 species. The genus is diverse and includes annuals, perennials, succulents, shrubs and tubers that range in height from a few centimetres to several metres. The flowers are irregularly shaped, with two upper petals and three lower ones. The genus encompasses an enormous variety of leaf shape and textures.

One of the traits that attracted breeders is that many of the species are both floriferous and long-flowering. The first I grew, *P. ionidiflorum*, is covered with sprays of flowers from early spring and only stops flowering when I cut the plant back for >

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

▷ overwintering. This ability to produce flowers over a long period can be seen in modern hybrids.

Many species pelargoniums are grown for their scented leaves rather than for their flowers. The most common are rose-scented species, such as *P. capitatum*, and citrus-scented ones, such as *P. citronellum*, which have formed part of complex breeding programmes to produce scented-leaved pelargoniums. Peppermint, balsam and spice perfumes are also found in species pelargoniums. The scent from the wild plants is far stronger than that of the cultivars and hybrids, and I remember a warm evening in the Western Cape when just a few plants of *P. citronellum* filled the air with the sharp smell of lemon.

More than 80 per cent of pelargoniums are native to the south western tip of South Africa although *P. triste*, the first to arrive in Britain in the early 17th century, was known as Indian storksbill in the belief it came from India. The powerful night-time scent of its tiny flowers – reminiscent of jasmine – caused a sensation.

Perfumed flowers is a trait of some species pelargoniums that has been lost in breeding hybrids. Sometimes the scent is soft and faint, as in the fringed flowers of *P. caffrum*, and sometimes so heady that it is almost overpowering, and not always pleasant *P. gibbosum*, an unusual-looking plant with succulent stems and leaves, has flowers with a particularly strong perfume that a friend has likened to toilet cleaner.

In the wild very little hybridisation occurs, even when species are growing close to each other, but as early as the start of the 19th century, plant collectors began crossing different species. The results known as primary (or species) hybrids tend to closely resemble their parents, but the same cross can produce different plants. Both the fiery-red *P. 'Ardens'* (see page 53) and the larger purple-red *P. 'Schottii'* (page 58) are from the same parents. Both were once seen only in the collections of enthusiasts but are now, thanks in part to micropropagation, widespread and popular.

These species and primary hybrid pelargoniums don't have the razzamatazz of their highly interbred descendants but they provide a diversity of colour, texture and scent that is perpetually captivating.

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

Species pelargoniums



Pelargonium sidoides

Sprays of dark-purple, almost black, flowers contrast with the silvery grey, heart-shaped leaves. Used in traditional medicine in South Africa and still found in some cold remedies. 25cm. AGM. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. caffrum

The fringed petals give the flower a slightly zany look. Leaves are so narrow that they seem skeletal. It was very popular when introduced in the 1860s but is now seldom grown. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. lobatum

Large, velvety leaves appear from a peculiar-looking, woody tuber followed by umbels of cream-and-brown flowers that are sweetly scented at night. Parent of some attractive hybrids. 20cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. schizopetalum

A large, gnarled tuber – more mineral than vegetable – with short stems of wispy flowers, scented at night. Lower petals are usually flushed purple and upper ones a yellowish-green. 20cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. gibbosum

A sprawling plant – stems up to a metre long – with unusual swellings at the leaf joints and succulent-like, blue-grey foliage. Flowers are a yellowish-green colour and strongly scented at night. 50cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. capitatum

Soft, downy foliage that is strongly rose-scented, and tight clusters of mauve flowers. One of the first pelargoniums introduced into Europe. Now grown commercially for its scented oils. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. alpinum

The form most commonly found in cultivation has a chocolate-coloured line that follows the shape of the leaf. It can become straggly with age so should be cut back regularly. 30cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. ionidiflorum

A neat and compact dome of small, serrated leaves (2cm long) that is smothered with sprays of pink flowers. Long-flowering – mine starts in May and carries on until the end of September. 35cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. reniforme

Kidney-shaped, greyish-green leaves with a velvety texture and flowers that are usually a startling shade of pink. The plant's size and habit is very similar to *P. sidoides*. 25cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. betulinum

An upright plant with woody stems that has fresh-green, rounded foliage and large pink flowers. The flowers resemble those of modern regal hybrids and it may be an ancestor. 30cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.

Species pelargoniums



P. myrrhifolium
A prostrate, rather straggly, plant with finely cut, lacy foliage and pale-pink flowers with red veining on upper petals. The larger flowered form var. *coriandrifolium*, is more widely available. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. lanceolatum
The fleshy, glaucous leaves are, as the name suggests, lance-shaped and held upright. Flowers are white with a red mark on the upper petals. Not as floriferous as other species. 45cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. trifidum
A sprawling plant with spicy aromatic foliage whose stems can reach a metre long. The creamy-white flowers have narrow petals with maroon blotches on the upper pair and are up to 3cm wide. 15cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. articulatum
An improbable-looking plant with heart-shaped leaves at the end of 20cm-long stalks. It has been used in breeding programmes to produce the more upright zonal pelargoniums. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. tomentosum
A species grown more for its spectacular foliage than for its sprays of tiny leaves. The leaves are large, smell of peppermint and have the texture of velvet, making them irresistible to touch. 50cm. AGM. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. grandiflorum
An upright plant whose stems become woody with age. Leaves are smooth and glaucous and flowers are usually pale pink with red veining on the upper set. An ancestor of the regal type. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. quinquelobatum
An easy-to-grow annual with apple-green foliage and biscuit-coloured flowers, which, as the temperature and light-levels change, develop an iridescent sheen on the petals. My favourite. 20cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. australe
A compact, low-growing species with dark-green, slightly hairy, leaves that have a reddish reverse and stems. The white flowers are often flecked with pink. Native to Australasia. 30cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



***P. echinatum* 'Album'**
Known in the 19th century as the 'sweetheart pelargonium' for the heart-shaped, red markings on its upper petals. In the wild the species occasionally has pink or magenta flowers. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. triste
An unpromising mound of feathery foliage followed by tall stems of tiny, cream flowers with purple blotches on the petals. Its real joy is the honey-and-clove perfume it produces at night. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.

Cultivation

- All pelargoniums need to be kept in a cool greenhouse over winter. The two species found in the Middle East, *P. endlicherianum* and *P. quercetorum*, are reputedly hardy and I know of gardeners in sheltered areas who leave *P. sidoides* outside year round, but if you want to be sure that your pelargoniums will survive the winter they need to be in a greenhouse, conservatory or coldframe. I grow mine in a loam-based compost that is about one third each of loam, composted bark and horticultural grit. Whatever compost you use it must be well drained: waterlogging is the quickest way to kill off a pelargonium. I use clay pots not only because they are more attractive but also because any excess moisture can evaporate through the clay. Like all plants growing in pots, pelargoniums will need to be fed. Species plants need far less fertiliser than hybrids and I give mine a liquid tomato feed once a month between May and September.

- Most pelargoniums thrive in dry, sunny situations but *P. tomentosum* grows best in dappled shade. Wherever they are grown, pelargoniums benefit from good air circulation, so don't overcrowd them.

- Unless you want to collect seed, cutting back the dead flowers will, in most species, prolong flowering. On plants such as *P. sidoides*, *P. reniforme*, *P. echinatum* and other species with a long flower stem, cut the whole stem off down to the base. With densely floriferous plants, such as *P. ionidiflorum*, *P. australe* and *P. trifidum*, I find it more effective to shear off all the flower stems once the majority have flowered.

- At the end of the growing season, before the plants are put into the greenhouse, I cut out any damaged stems and then cut back the whole plant by about two thirds. This can seem drastic but it will ensure that the plant is easier to store and that the increased air flow around it will minimise disease.

Pelargonium* vs. *Geranium

The disagreement about the naming of pelargoniums is an old one and even in the late 19th century gardening publications were complaining about gardeners who confused the two. Botanically, the genus *Pelargonium* includes all species plants and the modern hybrids that are commonly known as geraniums. The 18th-century botanist Carl Linnaeus grouped pelargoniums, erodiums and geraniums together and it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that botanists, with a few dissenters, agreed that they were different genera. It is peculiar that two centuries later no one would call an erodium a geranium but we are still referring to pelargoniums as geraniums. At the time of the change erodiums, geraniums and pelargoniums were popularly known as heronsbills, cranesbills and storksills, respectively, after the resemblance of their seedpods to the beaks of birds. The word pelargonium is derived from the Greek word *pelargos*, meaning a stork.

Where to buy

• Fibrex Nurseries

Honeybourne Road,
Pebworth, Stratford-upon-Avon,
Warwickshire CV37 8XP.
Tel 01789 720788, fibrex.co.uk

• Pelargonium Species World

Online only seed supplier.
pelargoniumspeciesworld.com

• Woottens of Wenhaston

The Iris Field, Hall Road,
Wenhaston, Suffolk IP19 9HF.
Tel 01502 478258,
woottensplants.com

Reader offer

Gardens Illustrated readers can purchase five exclusive collections of species and scented pelargoniums at a special price from pelargonium specialist Woottens of Wenhaston. See page 104 for details.

Primary hybrids



P. 'Blandfordianum'

Deeply cut leaves have a pungent, wormwood scent and masses of flowers with a deep-pink smudge on the upper petals. Originally raised by the Marquis of Blandford in 1805. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. 'Schottii'

From the same parent as *P. 'Ardens'*, this has feathery, silvered foliage and larger flowers. The petals are a reddish purple and marked with black lines. Easy to propagate from stem cuttings. 40cm. AGM. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. 'Splendide'

A neat, compact mound of silver-grey foliage that is smothered from late spring with carmine and pale-pink flowers. Thought to be a hybrid of *P. tricolor* and *P. ovale*. 20cm. AGM. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. 'Deerwood Lavender Lass'

A primary hybrid raised in the USA in the 1990s, this is a sprawling plant with tight clusters of pale-pink flowers. Starts flowering in late April and is still going strong in October. 60cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.



P. 'Lawrenceanum'

Arching sprays of deep-purple petals with a pale edge that makes the flowers gleam. A cross between *P. 'Ardens'* and *P. lobatum* that has a spicy scent at night. 40cm. RHS H1C, USDA 10b-11.

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