

Pearly queens

When most other flowers have faded, nerines and amarines step forth to shine – a sight that thrills Kitty de Jong, who runs a nursery in the Netherlands dedicated to the plants

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS SIETSKE DE VRIES

In brief
Name Agro Fleur Select.
What A wholesale production nursery and breeding centre specialising in nerines and amarines.
Where The Netherlands, on two sites south of Amsterdam and at Creil in the province of Flevoland.
Size 12.4 acres.
Soil Well-drained sandy loam.
Climate A maritime climate influenced by the North Sea with cool summers and cold winters.
Hardiness rating USDA 8.



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

We are all familiar with images of the multicoloured bands of flowers that paint the Dutch landscape in spring. The area around the country's famous bulb garden at Keukenhof, in particular, is a patchwork of small nurseries, separated by narrow canals, that grow tulips, daffodils, hyacinths and alliums. By the end of the summer, the bulb fields are bare save for the occasional explosion of candy-floss pink and sparkling white from the fields of nerines. Several of these fields are tended by Kitty de Jong, whose passion for the genus has earned her locally the epithet 'Queen of the Nerines'.

Nerines are South African bulbs whose flowers sparkle in the dull days of autumn, their pinks and reds a startling and restorative sight. "They are sprinkled with gold dust," says Kitty, who explains that this luminosity is created by cells on the surface of the petals that capture and concentrate light to create a glittery surface, which shimmers in the weak autumnal sunshine.

Kitty inherited her passion for the genus from her father, Kees, who established a cut-flower nursery near Leiden 50 years ago. He started breeding new cultivars and was attracted to nerines because they are at their best when few other plants are in flower.

Kees also began experimenting with amarines – a hybrid created by fertilising the stigma of *Amaryllis belladonna* with pollen from a nerine, which produces larger flowers with greener leaves. Selecting a new hybrid is a long process. Thousands of seeds are sown and the plants grown for three to four years before a flower is formed. If the flower is sufficiently interesting, it is grown on for several years to assess its qualities. Producing enough bulbs to sell to gardeners is, even with modern techniques, equally laborious.

After studying horticulture at university, Kitty joined her father, but six years ago the land their nursery stood on was earmarked ▷

Kitty de Jong grows nerines and amarines, such as these *x Amarine tubergenii* 'Aphrodite', on land near Lisse in the Netherlands. Come autumn, long after the tulips that characterise this area have died back, these plants burst into flower.

▷ for housing development. “We could have closed but I decided to carry on,” says Kitty. Today, as well as breeding and growing nerines and amarines, she grows peonies, agapanthus and asclepias on sites near Lisse.

Helped by a team of five, Kitty manages ten acres of nerines and amarines. The new bulbs are planted in the spring and the flowers are sold to the floristry market in the autumn. Then the bulbs are lifted, graded and the largest sold to bulb wholesalers.

As a grower, Kitty is fascinated by the botany of the plant. “If you cut a bulb of *Nerine bowdenii* in half you can see two or even three embryonic flower buds,” she says. These develop sequentially, starting with the largest bud, over the forthcoming years. “I think this is the only bulbous plant that has this. It means there are several years’ flowers inside a single bulb. This adds to the magic.”

Kitty has a vast glasshouse where she breeds and trials new cultivars of amarine and nerine. She’s already introduced four cultivars of amarine and is now working on a pure-white one. “I want gardeners to have a wide choice,” she says. “And I want gardeners who don’t know them to see these brilliant, happy stars brightening the garden in the autumn.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Agro Fleur Select is not open to the public but more information can be found at agrofleurselect.nl. Suppliers include Hayloft (hayloft-plants.co.uk), Hoyland Plant Centre (somethingforthegarden.co.uk), Jacques Amand (jacquesamandintl.com) and Crocus (crocus.co.uk).

1 Breeding a new nerine takes patience and a keen eye. Kitty regularly assesses potential new cultivars.

2 Like Russian dolls, *Nerine bowdenii* bulbs contain embryonic flower buds within them.

3 Bulbs are lifted after flowering, then cleaned and graded. The largest are sold to bulb wholesalers.

Right Nerines and amarines, including *Nerine bowdenii* ‘Zalm’, enjoy the well-drained soil of Kitty’s nursery. The fields produce a double crop: flowers for florists and bulbs for gardeners.



Cultivation

***Nerine bowdenii* and amarines are hardy in sunny situations in well-drained soil.** To flower well the bulbs need to be baked during the summer, so avoid planting them where they will be overshadowed by other plants. Plant the bulbs just below the surface of the soil in large clumps. In cold areas mulch them after they have finished flowering to give extra protection during wet and cold winters.

During the first year after planting, nerines can be shy to flower. Be patient: as soon as they have settled in they should produce lots of flowers. The bulbs hate being disturbed, so

once you have planted them avoid moving the bulbs until they are so congested that they stop flowering.

Nerines and amarines love pots and, if you live in a cold and wet region, this is the best way to grow them. Use a loam-based compost with about 20 per cent horticultural grit and plant the bulbs with their noses peeking above the surface of the soil. Water lots when the plant starts into growth but keep dry when finished flowering and store away from frosts. Bulbs flower best crowded tightly together, so don’t be too eager to split the bulbs – once every four or five years is sufficient.

12 of Kitty's favourite nerines and amarines

1 x *Amarine tubergenii* 'Aphrodite' (Belladiva Series)

Each of the stems can produce up to ten rose-pink flowers between August and October. The foliage is semi-evergreen and able to withstand up to -5°C of frost. 50cm. RHS H4, USDA 8b-9a.

2 *Nerine* 'Elegance'

A cross between *Nerine bowdenii* and the less hardy *N. sarniensis*. The dark-pink flowers have slightly crimped petals and a pearly sheen. Flowers from August up to October. 60cm. RHS H4. USDA 8b-9a.

3 *N. bowdenii* 'Zalm'

The name translates into English as 'salmon' and the flowers are indeed the colour of poached wild salmon. It lasts for days in bouquets, making it a popular cultivar with florists. 50cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

4 *N. elegance* 'Xandra'

Another offspring of *N. bowdenii* and *N. sarniensis*, the mid-pink flowers have a paler central rib. This is a new hybrid that will be available in the near future. 60cm. RHS H4, USDA 8b-9a.

5 *N. bowdenii* 'Vesta K'

A popular cultivar in the cut flower industry, the flowers are a soft-pink colour with slightly twisting petals. The flowers are about 20cm wide. 50cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

6 *N. bowdenii* 'Lipstick'

The pale-pink petals with a darker tip give the flower a two-tone look. Kitty thinks it may be the first bicolor cultivar. It flowers on strong stems but is not yet widely available. 40cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

7 x *A. tubergenii* 'Tomoko' (Belladiva Series)

A hybrid with rich-magenta flowers that are a far more intense colour than is

usual. The dark stems complement the flowers. In Kitty's trials, it has flowered from August to November. It is not yet widely available. 60-70cm. RHS H4, USDA 8b-9a.

8 x *A. tubergenii* 'Anastasia' (Belladiva Series)

One of a range of hybrids bred by Kitty that flowers on her nursery between August and the beginning of November. The leaves grow through the winter and those damaged by hard frosts will regrow. Flowers are dark pink. 70cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

9 x *A. tubergenii* 'Emanuelle' (Belladiva Series)

Another offspring of Kitty's breeding programme, with large, pink flowers on thick, tall stems from the end of August to November. The foliage will tolerate -5°C of frost. 70cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

10 *N. bowdenii* 'Athena'

There are several cultivars with white flowers but for Kitty this one is by far the best. It is a vigorous plant that reaches its peak in October, and the flowers are a sparkling, clean shade of white. 50cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

11 *N. 'Helena'*

A floriferous and long-flowering hybrid that will be available to buy in the near future. The salmon-pink flowers are much larger than the species and have a silvery sheen. Kitty considers this to be one of the most beautiful of the nerines she grows. 50cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

12 *N. bowdenii* 'Isabel'

An early flowering cultivar with deep-magenta flowers, which was bred by Kitty and named after her eldest daughter. It starts flowering at the beginning of August. 50cm. RHS H5, USDA 7b-8a.

