

*Allium lusitanicum*  
'Summer Beauty' boasts  
pretty heads of soft pink  
flowers that appear from  
June to August.

# Know Your Alliums

There's more to alliums than the familiar purple globes of late spring, and nobody knows this better than National Collection holder - and allium devotee - Jackie Currie

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gardeners seek out something different: alliums in colours besides purple or those with quirky flower shapes beyond the spherical. Unfortunately, that's also when many of us come unstuck. This vast genus comprises more than 1,000 species from varied habitats across the northern hemisphere and because of this diversity, not all alliums grow the same way.

That's what Jackie Currie quickly discovered when she decided she wanted to get to know alliums better. "I'm a garden designer," she explains, "and my business partner and I always used *A. hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' in the gardens we worked on. I wanted to expand what we were using and I thought there *must* be others." Before planting anything unfamiliar in a client's garden, Jackie likes to trial it for a few years first, so after a bit of research, 50 allium hybrids were duly planted at her allotment. "I fell in love," she says. "They were all so amazing – I just bought more and more. I found them fascinating, but the big problem was how to keep them all alive – they aren't all easy."

Researching their origins and growing requirements took her to Wisley's libraries, where she was introduced to Plant Heritage. By that point, Jackie was already growing around 180 alliums, and once she'd discovered that they weren't represented in the charity's network of National Collections, becoming a collection holder was a foregone conclusion. Trips to the Netherlands followed – almost all the allium bulbs we buy are Dutch – including

a visit to the largest grower of alliums in the world, where Jackie really got to grips with their care.

It turned out to be a revelatory visit. Having observed the Dutch commercial growers, Jackie realised we've been growing our alliums wrong. While they will usually do well from an autumn planting, putting on an impressive show in their first spring, if you've ever been disappointed when the same display fails to materialise in the second year, or the flowers seem to be dwindling, it's time to have a closer look at their growing requirements.

Jackie splits alliums into three groups depending on what they like, one of which is her 'lift, dry and bake' group. "What kills an allium isn't winter wet,

**Above** A mixture of deep purple *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' and the paler flowerheads of *Allium hollandicum*.

**B**obbing above late-spring borders, their perfect purple spheres brilliantly filling the gap between April's tulips going over and June's roses and perennials getting started, it is no wonder that alliums are so often recommended. They're a garden designer go-to on account of their chic looks, but they're also popular in 'old-school' gardens – if ever a plant could be called 'essential', alliums are it.

As a result, most of us are pretty familiar with the purple, globe-shaped alliums, those stalwart May-flowering varieties such as *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation'. But with familiarity comes a certain ubiquity, so it's not surprising that many



**Above left** Starry flowers of *Allium cristophii* begin to open from their bud.

**Above right** *Allium nigrum* is a good choice for fresh white flowers.

**Below right** 'Purple Rain' bulbs can be split and replanted to create big drifts of vibrant colour.

**Below left** *A. obliquum* is an easy choice in green.

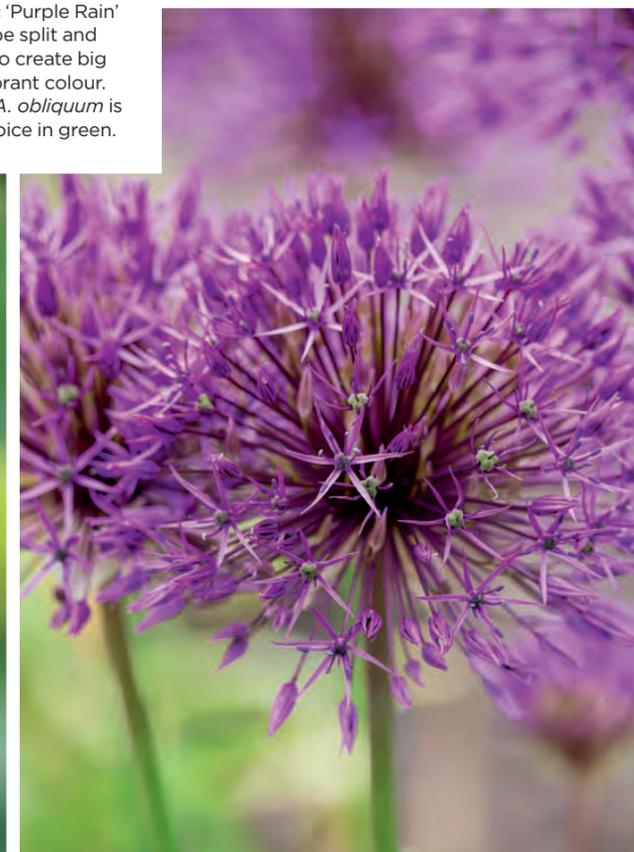
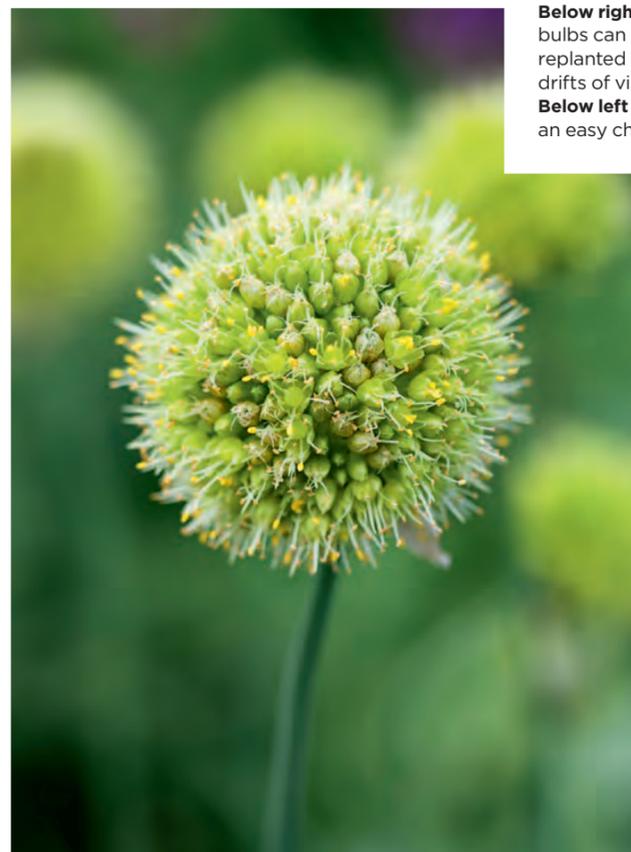
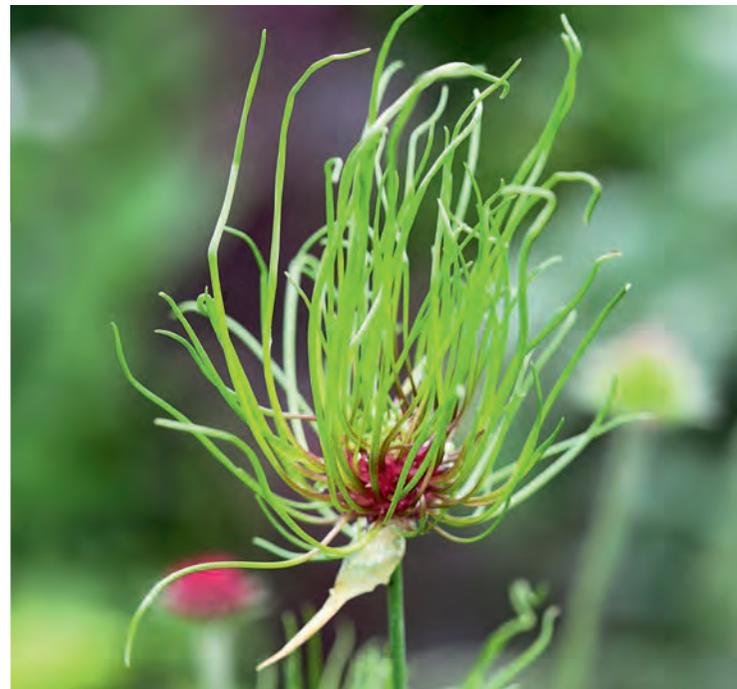


IMAGE: CLIVE NICHOLS



it's summer wet," she reveals. "They need a summer rest." Now, Jackie emulates Dutch growers and these bulbs' natural habitats and lifts the alliums in this group once they've finished flowering, letting them dry off and bake in her greenhouse (or garage if the greenhouse gets too hot – 23-26°C is ideal). She simply places the bulbs in sawdust-lined trays, which she covers with newspaper to protect them from direct sun, then replants, ideally in mid-September.

This group includes many of the familiar purple alliums: *A. aflatunense* and *A. giganteum* for example. Happily, stalwart *A. hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' can be left in the ground. "It is still the best allium for colour," she notes, recommending you plant the bulbs in autumn, then plant top ups each autumn for the next two years. After that, seedlings from the first lot of bulbs will have reached flowering size, and you'll never have to replant. "You'll have hundreds," Jackie confirms.

Offering an even greater return is 'Purple Rain', a variety Jackie rates highly. This one belongs to her second group: alliums that can be left in the

**Top left** Delicate *Allium roseum* flowers in June.

**Top right** An emerging flower of *A. stipitatum*.

**Above right** 'Hair' is quirky but invasive, warns Jackie; red bulbils at the base of the flower help it spread widely.

**Above left** Impactful 'Globemaster' is sterile so won't seed around.

ground but should be lifted every three years and divided (see also 'Summer alliums' on page 104). Lift 'Purple Rain' and you'll find large bulbs that split apart generously, giving you trugfuls to replant. 'Globemaster' belongs to this group too. "This is a lovely old hybrid. It's good because it's sterile, so if you like to leave the seedheads on but you don't want an allium that's going to seed everywhere, 'Globemaster' is the one for you," Jackie advises. She recommends lifting the bulbs after three years because they become congested, and replanting the individual, viable bulbs. It's the same for *A. stipitatum* 'Violet Beauty'. "If you lift and divide after three years, you'll have lots of small bulbs to replant, but do it as soon as it finishes flowering because the bulbs drop down deep in the soil to a good 20cm, which means they can be hard to find!"

Jackie's final group comprises alliums that don't flower every year. "Their bulbs are a bit like garlic,"

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she explains. Alliums such as *A. ampeloprasum* or 'Mercurius' will flower in year one, but then the bulb splits into six to ten smaller 'cloves', which won't flower the following year. The solution is to lift the bulbs, pull them apart and plant the bulblets individually. Do this in conjunction with planting new bulbs for a few years for continuity.

For white flowers, Jackie says *Allium stipitatum* 'Mount Everest' and *A. nigrum* are the best, with 'Mount Everest' flowering in mid-May and *A. nigrum* taking over at the end of the month and into June. "Neither of them need to be lifted and baked," she says, "but *A. nigrum* doesn't bulk up, so after about three years it does tend to disappear." For blue flowers, she recommends *A. caesium* and the smaller species *A. sikkimense* and *A. cyaneum*. For lime-green flowerheads, look to easy *A. obliquum*.

Years of study have given Jackie encyclopaedic knowledge, to the point where she can identify many alliums from their bulbs alone. "You get to know their quirks when you work with them all year round," she says. Avoid *A. vineale* 'Hair', she advises – "it's a real weed". *A. roseum* is "one to be careful with because it spreads around and can be a bit of a pest". *Allium schubertii*, with its exploding constellations of starry flowers is "a weird one". The bulbs we buy of this species are already five years old, and it only lives eight to ten years then "drops dead", so it doesn't have the longevity of others.

### Summer alliums

Jackie's group of alliums that need to be lifted and divided every three years also includes many summer-flowering varieties, which are well worth exploring for their ability to extend the display. Look out for *Allium lusitanicum* 'Summer Beauty', which has pale violet-pink flowers loved by bees and butterflies, or white-flowered *A. tuberosum* (also known as garlic chives). Jackie recommends dainty pink *A. angulosum* (mouse garlic) and *A. nutans*, which also goes by the common names of Siberian chives or blue chives, for underplanting roses to hide their bare stems, and *A. cernuum*, the nodding onion, for its flowerheads of pendent bells (similar to those of *Nectaroscordum* – now *Allium siculum*). Then there's dark purple *A. wallichii*, which flowers even later, from August to September – imagine, an allium in late summer's prairie schemes! All can be lifted and their clumps split by a spade for replanting.

**Above left** *A. stipitatum* 'Mount Everest', another excellent white variety.

**Top right** 'Beau Regard' has lovely, strong-stemmed flowers.

**Above right** Egg-shaped *Allium sphaerocephalon* flowers are produced in June and July.



'Eros' is the "allium for people who don't like alliums", while shuttlecock-shaped, wine-red *A. atropurpureum* should be grown as an annual, since British gardeners haven't a hope of replicating the summer baking it gets in its native Iraq – even putting its bulbs in an egg incubator over summer failed to work for Jackie. Quirks aside, it's clear that if you only think of alliums as round and purple, you're missing out on a wealth of other possibilities. "You can really extend the flowering season by using quite a mixture," Jackie says. It's just a matter of getting to know them better. ■

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Jackie's National Collection of alliums opens by appointment – visit [plantheritage.org.uk](http://plantheritage.org.uk) for more information. Visit [euphorbia-design.co.uk](http://euphorbia-design.co.uk) for Jackie's garden design practice.