

plant focus: alliums

# GLOBE TROTTERS

Pick up pace in your garden by adding height and drama to borders with the spherical perfection of alliums ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS | WORDS SUSIE WHITE

*Allium giganteum*  
with a backdrop  
of aquilegias -  
the perfect May  
partnership.

## plant focus: alliums



*Each flower is positioned to get the maximum amount of sunlight*

Look closely at the head of an allium and you will see a dense matrix of individual flowers forming a sculptural globe. With mathematical precision, each flower is positioned to get the maximum sunlight. There is incredible beauty in the detail. Stand back, and you see a ball of colour so vivid that the stalk seems to disappear, leaving the flowerhead suspended among other plants.

My love of alliums began when I ran Chesters Walled Garden in Northumberland, which was famous for its herbs. I began collecting cultivars of the onion family, as well as leaving garlic, leeks and chives to flower for the bumblebees. Not far away on Hadrian's Wall were rare examples of wild chives, so I grew these in the Roman Garden at Chesters. As well as using the leaves in cooking, I liked to tease out the individual mauve florets for a vibrantly pungent salad flavouring.

Among the cultivars of chives are two gems: *Allium schoenoprasum* 'Black Isle Blush', a light mauve with a pink centre; and 'Pink Perfection', a vibrant pink. Both originated at Poyntzfield Herb Nursery on the Black Isle in Scotland, where Duncan Ross found groups of promising seedlings to isolate and grow on.

'From just one bulb of each,' he explains, 'I was later able to divide them. Chives are vigorous growers, and within four years I had enough to send to the RHS, which was conducting trials. Much to my surprise, both were given an Award of Garden Merit.'

Inspired by culinary alliums, my interest moved out into ornamental ones that I could intersperse among Chesters' exuberant flower borders. A few bulbs of *Nectaroscordum siculum* quickly self-seeded, their dusky apricot bells a delight; their quirky seedpods looking like lopsided Disney castles. As cut flowers, they can last for a couple of weeks. They even infiltrated my new garden at Bridge Eal, hitching a ride among hostas and sanguisorbas.

At Bridge Eal, I've experimented with all sorts of allium combinations: *Allium sphaerocephalon* with corncockle, or an *A. cristophii* emerging between the large white flowers of *Geranium himalayense* 'Derrick Cook'.

Gina Price, who designed Pettifers Garden in Oxfordshire, uses lots of alliums in her imaginative planting, including the dainty *Allium cernuum*. 'It's a delicate little allium which spreads easily,' she says. 'It nods prettily and is suitable for the top of a wall.'

### FOUR CONTRASTING LOOKS

Because the leaves of alliums yellow and die early, they are best grown among perennials that hide their tatty foliage. The combination of grasses and alliums is one of contrasts: the flowers seem to explode and sparkle among the delicacy of wavy grasses. Here are four to try.

**1 *Allium* 'Firmament'** The rich purple of this cultivar comes from one parent, *A. atropurpureum*; the large globe flowerhead from the other, *A. cristophii*. Impressive and gleaming with a metallic sheen, 'Firmament' has long-lasting flowers suitable for cutting.

**2 *Allium cristophii*** Huge globes on stout stems give this allium real presence in a border. It has

spiky amethyst stars, dramatic even in decay, and an evocative common name, Star of Persia.

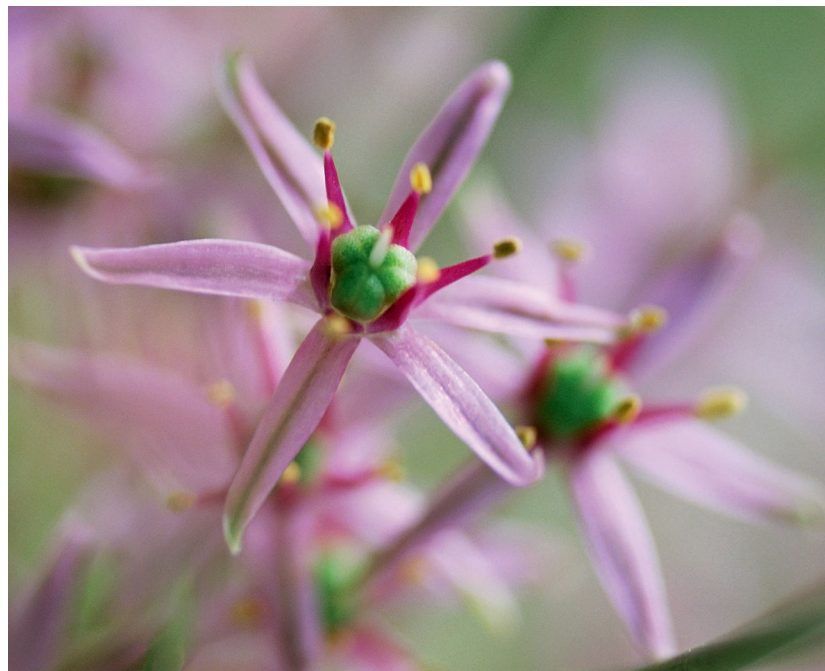
**3 *Allium vineale* 'Hair'** With its tousled, just got out of bed look, 'Hair' is a definite oddity. Behind its bleached ends, it has a purple centre like some mad re-growth. These muted colours mingle softly with the seedheads of autumn grasses; it is a fun curiosity.

**4 *Allium sphaerocephalon*** The drumstick allium starts as a prickly green cone shape, its flowers flushing deep pink, before turning a dark wine-purple. With strong stems and compact heads, it is delightful with the finer, shorter grasses: quaking grass, festucas or *Stipa tenuissima*. A popular type.



## EXPERT CULTIVATION TIPS

- **Chives need dividing regularly** or they become woody, according to Duncan Ross of Poyntzfield Herb Nursery.
- **In a clay soil**, chives are more resistant to rust, he explains, 'so as a way of preventing this from happening, we made a clay bed just for them. We double dug, bringing older clay to the surface. They will grow happily in sandy soil too though, especially given good airflow to prevent fungi.'
- **Most alliums need a sunny, well-drained site** that has not been manured, but some species such as *Allium moly* will do well in cool, damp borders. Plant the bulbs in autumn, Duncan suggests - their foliage emerges surprisingly early.



The self-seeding habit of some alliums is not always so welcome. '*Allium carinatum* subsp. *pulchellum* is pretty but rampageous. I gave it to two friends because they admired it; they are now furious with me,' says Gina, chuckling.

Another allium that is notorious for escaping from gardens is the invasive wild garlic, *A. triquetrum*, still for sale through bulb companies, but in some areas of Britain has become a problem species.

Probably the best known of the ornamental alliums is *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation'. Gina Price teams this up with *Dictamnus albus* var. *purpureus* in a dreamy, romantic colour scheme. 'Purple Sensation' makes a lot of leaf,' she says, 'It is a rich purple, but I cut the heads off when they go ▶

### PREVIOUS PAGE

Chive *Allium schoenoprasum* 'Pink Perfection'.

### CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

*A. schubertii*;  
*A. 'Globemaster'* has giant flowers;  
*A. carinatum* subsp. *pulchellum* can be invasive.



HEAVY  
SELF  
SEEDER



## plant focus: alliums

### WHERE TO BUY

#### ● Cotswold Garden Flowers

Cotswold Garden Flowers,  
Sands Lane, Badsey, Evesham  
WR11 7EZ. Tel: +44 (0)1386 833849.  
www.cgf.net

#### ● Poyntzfield Herb Nursery

Black Isle, Ross & Cromarty IV7 8LX.  
Tel: +44 (0)1381 610352.  
www.poyntzfieldherbs.co.uk

### WHERE TO SEE

#### ● Pettifers Garden

Lower Wardington, Banbury,  
OX17 1RU.  
Tel: +44 (0)1295 750232.  
www.pettifers.com

#### ● RHS Garden Harlow Carr

Crag Lane, Harrogate HG3 1QB.  
Tel: 0845 2658070.  
www.rhs.org.uk



EASY-  
TO-GROW  
OPTION



over, as they make the border look gloomy.' Not all alliums are robust, and Gina finds that she does need to replace the white-flowered *A. stipitatum* 'Mount Everest' from time to time. Pure white and 1.2m tall, it has great stature.

She finds that *A. giganteum* also peters out, but there is one cultivar that really stands out and for her it is the best. 'I bought *Allium* 'Globemaster' from Bob Brown at Cotswold Garden Flowers, and from one bulb I got 30,' she explains. 'It's huge, has good leaves and it dies back well. It is fantastic.' The stately spheres of 'Globemaster' are formed by dark-violet, six-pointed stars. The seedheads are also magnificent when dried; without the flowers you can really admire their structure.

The way that all these individual florets make up the whole ball makes these bulbs so fascinating. There is a curious allium that looks as though two have been put together, one inside the other. It is made up of male and female florets; the female being the centre ball, with the male flowers seeming to explode out of it. This is *Allium*

*Long a stalwart of cottage gardens, Allium moly has golden yellow flowers and is delightful planted in drifts*

#### CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

*Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' planted with *Dictamnus albus* var. *purpureus*; the yellow *A. moly*; *A.* 'Firmament'; tall and striking; *A.* 'Mount Everest'.

*schubertii*, a stocky firework of a plant for the front of a border. Like all alliums, it teams up very well with low-growing, lime-green *Alchemilla mollis*.

One of my favourites is *Allium cristophii*, a plant I originally knew as *A. albopilosum*; this referred to the fine white hairs on the edges of the leaves. At Bridge Eal, I have used it to edge either side of the path that leads to the greenhouse. Coming from Iran, *A. cristophii* appreciates our well-drained Northumberland valley soil.

The effect of a double line of amethyst globes in a border with skirts of pale purple catmint is

pretty stunning, and is certainly a way of attracting bees and beneficial insects to the garden.

Not all alliums are in the white to purple colour range. Long a stalwart of cottage gardens, *Allium moly* has golden yellow flowers and is delightful. It will self-seed at the bottom of hedges or shrubs, a bright splash of sunshine in light shade. The effect is naturalistic and very different in tone from the pompom splendour of the grander cultivars. From informal to formal, from traditional to prairie, it is the ability of alliums to gel with differing planting styles that makes them so appealing. ♦