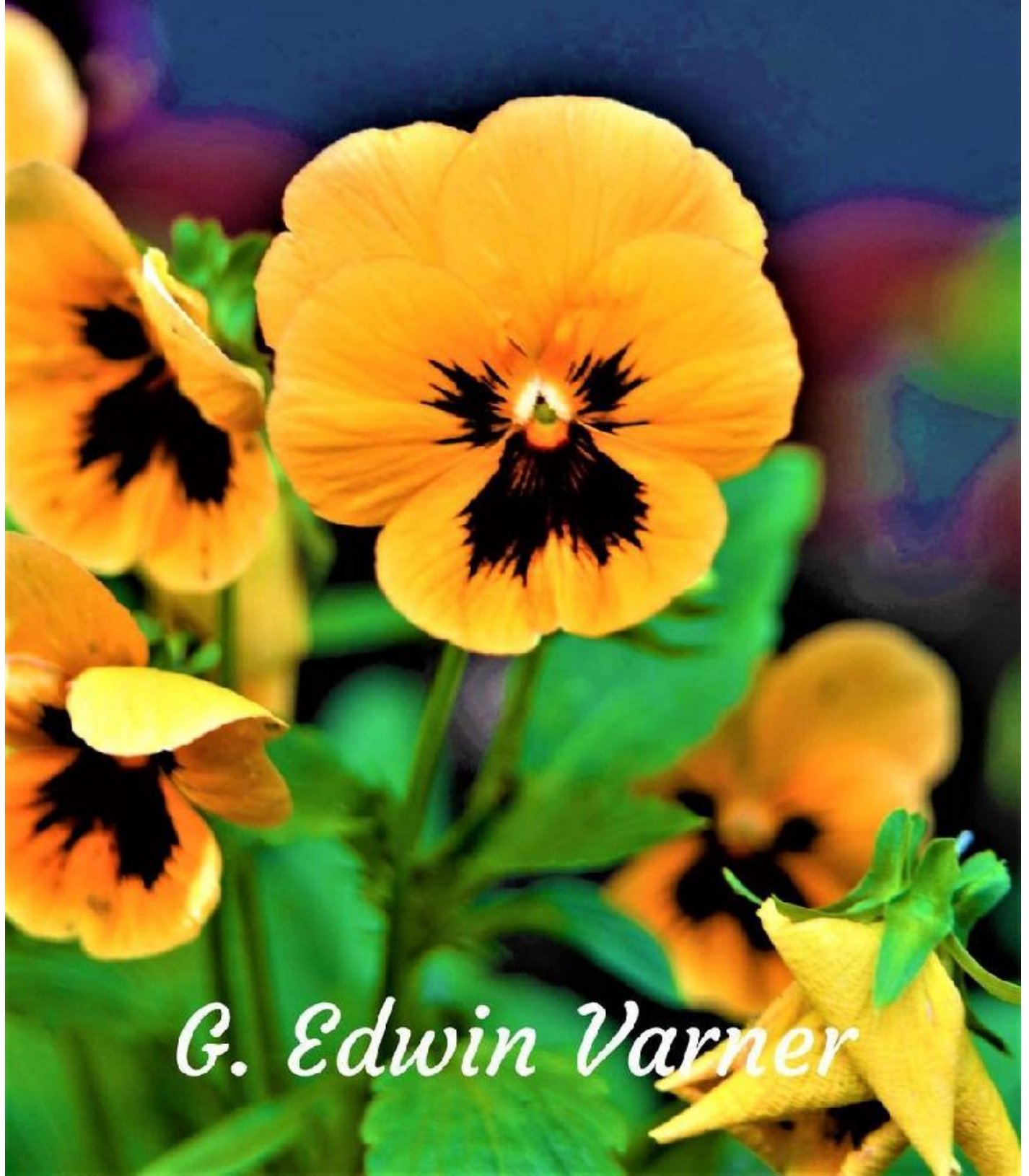


# Best Biennial Garden Flowers



*G. Edwin Varner*

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G. Edwin Varner

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BEST BIENNIAL GARDEN FLOWERS

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Written by G. Edwin Varner.

# Preface

We are all familiar with annual and perennial garden flowers. There is another group of plants that combine both qualities of these types but grow differently. It's time to appreciate biennial garden flowers. Don't avoid them — learn to create colorful beds and borders by adding them. This ebook describes those you can easily grow and proudly admire.

Portions of this publication's content are from my previous works on different floral subjects. I revised the wording and corrected some now-noticeable errors while researching the following plants.

The digital photos are of the flowers at my home, public gardens, many nurseries within my area, and Creative Commons (CC0) licensed images.

# Introduction

Several colorful varieties of annual and perennial flowers are available yearly by nearly all garden centers and internet-based nurseries. Annuals are always popular because they are usually in bloom and grow quickly to form colorful beds within a few weeks. Perennials exhibit a longer waiting time to flower but are reliable re-bloomers each year.

There is another type of garden flower classified as biennials which some gardeners either neglect or deliberately avoid growing for various reasons. Why do we find fault with them? Is it because they disappoint gardeners by blooming in the second growing season and dying by fall? They also produce excessive seeds and cannot replenish energy for another productive growing season as perennials do. But annuals do the same thing.

Biennials are also tall-growing plants. Many will exceed four feet or more, an unfavorable size for new gardeners. They used to grow in well-established gardens, but today, many people need more encouragement, resources, time, and commitment to raising them from seed. Nurseries and large garden centers usually neglect to offer us potted biennial plants. Fortunately, mail-order nurseries offer some popular types, but there are many more to enjoy.

Does all this negative publicity scare you from growing (and ultimately enjoying) these historically adored garden plants? Well, I hope not! If you wish to see outstandingly beautiful flowers in your garden, give the following biennial plants described in this ebook your undivided attention and admiration.

Don't forget them. See what has been missing in your flower gardens.

# Alcea – Hollyhock

## Alcea rosea



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If you wish to create vertical impressiveness, you must include this outstanding plant.

As a principal representative of the immense Mallow family, Hollyhocks have grown in flower gardens for centuries. They grow over eight feet in their second summer growth, overwhelming smaller gardens, but most can accommodate these enjoyable giants.

The blossoms may last one day (as usual for the Mallow family), but newer flowers form daily from early to late summer. Their colors range in shades ranging from dark rose, wine-purple, light yellow, pale pink,

red, and pure white. Those varieties having fully double petals are famous for their outstanding beauty.

They are easy to raise from seed and command attention to show off to your friends and neighbors. Make sure to plant them in a sunny, fertile and well-drained location.

All Hollyhocks are hardy from zone 4 to 9.

Seeds of many varieties are available in many garden centers and online nurseries.

# Campanula – Canterbury Bells

## Campanula medium



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These famous petal-forged bells will colorfully toll in the late spring and continue until midsummer with gorgeous blue, purple, pink, or heavenly white displays.

You will probably enjoy growing Canterbury Bells more than reading Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (except the more "bawdy" stories), for those dangling petaloid bells will create silent rapture when they bloom in your garden.

Long recognized as a necessary addition to any "cottage garden," from late spring to midsummer, usually on two to three feet tall stems. These

plants prefer to grow in well-drained but moist, humus soil in partially sunny locations. The most essential winter requirement is that the ground be well-drained to prevent root and growth-crown rot.

Like most other biennials, the plants can self-sow aplenty, but when first growing them in your garden, make sure to sow seeds two years in a row to establish repeat yearly blooming.

By including these flowers, channel your inner Chaucer into authoring a colorful tale about your garden. Adding “off-color” descriptive details is your prerogative.

# Cheiranthus – Wallflower

## Cheiranthus cheiri



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Better known as Wallflowers, these plants, related to cabbage and broccoli, gained prominence in English and European cottage gardens in years long past. Native to southern Europe, they grew in British gardens sometime around 1573. Eventually, they lost out in popularity—I suppose it's due to them being a biennial or a short-lived perennial.

It takes plants two years to bloom when grown from seed. The first year they grow vegetatively, then, by the following spring, bloom-like-mad, self-seed, and then die. Tragic but unstoppable.

Newer hybrids are available yearly from seed or, if particularly unique, by potted plants grown from cuttings such as a few old historical varieties. Obviously, they are expensive, but well worth enjoying their beautiful blooming.

Most flower colors range from bright yellow to orange, and some with red stripes. As with all other fragrant flowers, varieties have differing degrees of perfume. Some have potent scents like a stout, syrupy sweetness. Let's say it is better than overcooked broccoli!

All Wallflowers thrive in sunlight, light shade, and a well-drain, lime-based soil. The height of the varieties averages around 24 inches tall. They are hardy in zones 5 to 8. They make excellent container subjects for all zones.

Seeds are available in larger garden centers, but online nurseries offer rare vegetative cultivated varieties.

# Daucus – Queen Anne’s Lace and Dara

## Daucus carota



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Travel in several rural areas in the US during the summer, and you will see this common roadside and farm field weed. We commonly named it **Queen Anne’s Lace** (or Wild Carrot), with broad, lacy, white florets clumped together called an umbel.

The trouble with this plant is it’s very invasive. All those tiny blossoms also form many seeds that spread willy-nilly across the land. But there is a form called **Dara**, which is “relatively” safe to grow in your garden as a cut flower. Gardeners’ opinions differ if it is less invasive. For safety’s sake, clip off spent flower stalks before their seeds become ripe.

Dara has surprising, if not eye-opening, purple, pale burgundy, old rose-to-pink flower clusters. Queen Anne's Lace can grow to over four feet tall, but this type grows less lofty and is bushier. You can grow it from seed, sown either in early spring or fall, for it acts as a hardy annual (given a long growing season) but is more commonly grown as a biennial. Blooming begins in early summer so that you can enjoy their lacy florets.

Like Annie's Lace, Dara prefers to grow in very well-drained soil and sunny areas. Avoid making the soil too fertile because it will limit flower production in favor of more feathery or ferny leaves.

For bonus points, you can enjoy Dara (and Queen Anne's Lace) as a long-lasting cut flower or in dried arrangements.

# Delphinium - Larkspur

## *Delphinium elatum*



This popular biennial / perennial is a favorite occupant in any flower garden. You can easily recognize them in photos or drawings of old-fashioned cottage gardens with those towering flower spikes. Dark blue or purple flowering varieties are the most popular, but there are also

pleasant lighter shades of sky blue, pink, and pure white types available for home gardeners. Depending on how you manage growing these plants, I list them as biennial and perennial. They will survive for another growing year (or more) if you cut off the spent flower spikes before they develop their seeds.

As a popular hardy plant (zones 3 to 8) for gardens, you may think they are easy to grow. Well, that is not always the case. It can be a challenge to raise them from seed and grow to “adulthood.”

One challenge with many gardeners when sowing the seeds is providing them with a cold, moist period. Many perennials need this frigid experience for seed germination and proper spring and summer development.

These plants prefer cooler summer areas, regularly moist and fertile soil, and less windy locations. These requirements rule out several regions of the world. But, take heart, for new hybrid varieties, bred over the years, help adapt (to some extent) to less favorable conditions. These more modern types have sturdy stems supporting excessive floral-enhanced spikes. If your garden is exposed to occasionally strong winds, it is best to stake the stems.

Most Delphiniums can bloom all summer, but only if you cut off the central spikes and allow side branching spikes to grow. They may not grow as tall, but they still show spectacular colors.

These plants prefer to grow in plenty of sunlight, but most Delphiniums will suffer and perish if you live in arid climates. Make sure you add plenty of humus to incorporate into the ground to help retain moisture.

Historically, Delphinium gets its name from “delphis” — a Greek word meaning dolphin. The shape of the flower resembles (somehow) a Bottlenose Dolphin. Okay... if that’s what people imagine it to be. This must be the gardening version of a Rorschach Test.

Their other common nickname is Larkspur in some areas of the world. It can be confusing for many gardeners when referring to the annual species.

So, what large varieties can you sow or plant? Growers suggest the **Elatum Hybrid Strain** is currently the tallest — their floral spikes towering above six feet. This hybrid provides your usual base colors, many having semi-double petals with contrasting white, black, or brown centers (commonly called “bees”). Another varietal group is the **Pacific Hybrid Strain**, which grows “slightly” less tall (what are a few inches among admirers?) with similar flower colors.

# Dianthus – Sweet William

## Dianthus barbatus



Depending on when these plants were raised from seeds, growers usually consider them biennials but can also be annual or perennial. When grown as biennials, the plants survive the cold and produce abundant flowers for the early summer. If you clip back the spent flowers, you can “possibly” keep them for another year of splendor.

You can always count on growing these historically favorite plants to create a colorful impact on any garden bed or border. Unlike our large-flowered carnations offered by florists, these plants display impressive flower heads composed of several small clusters of single to double white, red, dark garnet, pink, and a mixture of colors. The petals usually have serrations — like cloth cut by pinking shears. Not a clothes

designer? Well, look it up on Google, and you will understand. This jagged pattern gives these flowers the common nickname of “pinks.”

Some varieties also have a noticeable clove scent — not as strong as carnations, but still evident when inhaling a bouquet.

Most types grow under two feet but branch out to form compact ovals of noticeably green to bronze-ish leaves and stems topped by these gorgeous flowers.

# Digitalis – Foxglove

## *Digitalis purpurea* varieties



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This hardy biennial is the most beautiful garden flower when developing a vertically enhanced garden. There are many opposing viewpoints on other contenders, but the tubular or funnel-shaped flowers dangling from their tall stalks look stunning.

Not only their petal base color but the excessive spotting of contrasting colors within the blossoms (technically called nectar guides) gives them a technicolor brilliance unsurpassed by many other flowers.

It is mesmerizing to stare into blossoms and “get lost” amongst these vivid colors and speckled patterns.

Most *Digitalis purpurea* varieties can grow over six feet tall, but this depends on providing the best growing conditions. They include being raised in partly shady, well-drained, moist, fertile soil. The best variety to achieve this towering achievement is to grow the **Excelsior Group**. This variety is “the top” in Digitalis enjoyment! It provides plenty of pink, lavender, and white-based flowers, all having neon contrasting nectar guide spots.

Although hardy from zones 4 to 8 and classified as a biennial, the *purpurea* species can be perennial if you snip off the spent flower stalks to prevent excessive seed formation. Beauty comes with a price of additional labor.

As with all species of Digitalis, these plants are poisonous if eaten. All parts of the plant contain a chemical called digitalin. Cardiologists commonly use this compound to treat heart conditions, especially in controlling congestive heart failure. Isn't it amazing that something so beautiful and deadly can save lives?

One nagging question arises: what does the common name “foxglove” mean? Ages ago, a myth originated in the rural English countryside where Digitalis grew abundantly in and around shady woodlands. Foxes would dig their dens underneath the evergreen leaves of extensive blooming areas of Digitalis. Before hunting for prey, they would slip the tubular flowers onto their paws (as gloves) to silence their movement. Well, at least they were stylish while hunting.

# Eryngium – Sea Holly

*Eryngium giganteum and Eryngium maritimum*



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Here is something Elsa of Arendelle may grow in Disney World flowerbeds. This hardy semi-perennial to biennial should add decorative bling to yours as well. The common name is fitting for having waxy, spiny, thistle-like leaves, usually silvery-gray, while some varieties have an attractive blue tint.

Naturalized for sandy coastal locations, you don't have to live near the seaside, for these plants will adapt well in rock gardens or borders supplemented with gravel-enhanced garden soil.

The flower heads and surrounding bracts have a shiny appearance, some varieties more so. They look like large ice crystals or snowflakes. A long popular variety called *Miss Wilmott's Ghost* is famous for its silvery-white, crystal-like flower heads. Other types offer metallic blue shades.

Hardy from zone 5 and up, Sea Holly is native to the sun-soaked coastal beaches of Europe. Clumps of plants can grow to three feet tall and wide and bloom from midsummer until fall.

Being exposed to the harsh sun and salt spray, the entire plant adapts to overheating and water loss by secreting a reflective waxy coating. What a strange paradox — naturally growing in hot, sunny locations while looking like ice crystal props in Disney's animated *Frozen* movies.

Years ago, wild plants were common near sand dunes. Today, botanists discover fewer populations because people steal them for additions to flower gardens. This does not have to be, for you can quickly grow attractive varieties from seed or purchased nursery plants.

You can also enjoy the flowers for the winter by drying the stems in the fall. Once dry, you can spray them with bright silver (gorgeous!), metallic blue, or gold paint sold in hardware or hobby stores. They make unusual and beautiful Christmas and winter decorations.

# Eschscholzia – California Poppy, Golden Poppy

**Eschscholzia californica**



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This gorgeous annual is perfect for your flower garden if you are a self-proclaimed semi-lazy gardener (no disrespect, given that many people lead hectic lives). It is one of the best sow-on-the-ground flowers, and as a biennial, you must wait until the following spring to enjoy your beds or borders with brilliant golden yellow, orange, red, and eye-catching pink flowers.

Being a sow-and-forget plant, don't count on them germinating "this year." In fact, you probably will forget about them until next year when

they germinate and grow, then later bloom. Their seeds tend to be excessively hard and need plenty of moisture (and possibly exposure to cold soil) to initiate germination. OK. That's the "fine print" observation on raising these outstanding plants.

Being a member of the Poppy family, this plant is native to the arid areas of far-western USA — notably California — and, no great surprise, Mexico.

The foliage has finely divided or feathery blue-green leaves topped with single to semi-double blossoms. The height of this bushy plant can be, on average, a foot tall, but if taller, it will flop over. This is of no concern, for new shoots always produce more flowers. The only "problem" is the petals close up at night and during cool, cloudy, and rainy days.

The plants grow best in sunny beds and borders with well-drained soil but prefer less-fertile conditions, unlike most other garden flowers. You can expect more stems and leaves but few flowers if excessively fertilized.

Find a less-than-ideal area by your home and scatter the seeds. They will amaze you with how they will increase by excessive flowering and with new self-sown seeds for the following year.

There are several varieties or strains of these plants. You can easily find the species in garden center seed racks, including a brilliant red form called **Red Chief**. Online nurseries offer more of a selection, including types with pastel and ruffled petals.

# Hesperis – Dame's Rocket or Sweet Rocket

## *Hesperis matronalis*



This plant has many common names, including Dame's Wort, Dame's Gilliflower, Damask Violet, Dame's Violet, Night-scented Gilliflower, Mother-of-the-Evening, and heaven knows how many other "Dame's What-ers."

Contrary to the common name, it has nothing to do with NASA-style rockets. Rocket is an old name for mustard plants or their close relatives. This plant is in the same family as cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower.

The Latin name *Hesperis* means “of the evening,” and *matronalis* means “motherly.” Somehow, it became associated with Eve (as in the famous Adam and Eve couple) but in a more negative way. Seventeenth-century English herbalist Nicholas Culpeper negatively called this plant “Eve’s Weed.” Shame on you, Nicholas. Poor Eve—all because of snacking on that forbidden fruit.

Native to Europe and Asia, it is a flower garden escapee growing wild in many moist, partly shady roadside ditches and outside woodlands.

Although *Hesperis* will make beautiful and hardy garden plantings, it can produce many seeds (like all members of the Cabbage Family.) It is ecologically invasive in several areas of North America and other continents, for it will grow wild in many moist, partly shady roadside ditches.

One primary reason this plant has spread so far and wide is the harmful practice of seed companies including it in wildflower seed mixes to sow in shady, moist areas for springtime blooms.

It begins life as a biennial, blooming the second spring into midsummer. However, it can live as a short-lived perennial for future flowering.

Botanists classify *Hesperis* as a vespertine flowering plant, which blooms with fragrant purple or white flowers and releases a sweet lily-like perfume into the evening air. Well, it smells better than cooked broccoli!

Hardy from zones 3 to 9, it thrives in part sun to full shade and moist, loamy soil and has been a popular wildflower in many flower gardens worldwide for centuries. You can include it in your garden, but clip off the seed stems to prevent excessive reseeding.

I hate to admit this, but this plant does not produce “drop-dead with amazement” garden flowers — except for their sweet scent. If you have a shaded, wooded area that needs sprucing up, purchase a few packets of seeds, sprinkle them here and there, and you should experience a beautiful sight by the following second spring. How easy is this to transform a dull area into something bright and beautiful?

# **Ipomopsis – Standing Cypress; Texas Plume; Red Gilia**

## **Ipomopsis rubra**



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Once viewed with its spikes of glowing, bright red, star-shaped, tubular flowers orbited with hummingbirds, you know you have to have this plant growing in your garden. Ahh, if only it were so simple to raise.

This is one plant that, in theory, should be easy to grow but usually proves not to be. It is one of those confusing, frustrating, and irritating plants that impatient gardeners hate to grow just because it is a biennial.

One disturbing fact is that seed companies should properly advise gardeners on sowing and growing it. As a biennial, *Ipomopsis* seeds require a cold and wet period to germinate in the spring and a full year of vegetative growth. The plants wait until the following summer to bloom.

Another area of confusion is with hardiness zones. Growers sometimes list *Ipomopsis* as an annual or a perennial hardy to zone 5. I wish it were reliably so, but zone 6 is the best cold-climate zone you can hope for. No, this plant prefers warmer climates, native to the US and Mexico's southwestern areas. Here, this plant can survive some winter cold and snow but not the northern state's long duration of Siberian-like cold. The overwintering rosette of fern-like leaves remains green but dormant until the warmth of spring.

One other factor for plant survival is for it to grow in very well-drained soil. Like many other desert-loving plants, it will develop a long taproot to obtain water in the dry, hot summer months. This root will only grow if the soil is sandy or gravelly. Regular, mulch-enhanced garden soil can rot the roots, so provide a different drier garden location to raise this plant.

OK, if you have grown your plants or bought some from a nursery, and they successfully lived over the winter, long stems — most rising to over five feet tall with several side branches — will arise from the rosette of leaves. A prodigious cluster of vivid red tubular blossoms will bloom throughout the summer. Newer hybrids now have shades of yellow and orange, but the vibrant red selections are the most popular.

Some growers and gardeners say *Ipomopsis* flowers are “hummingbird magnets,” drawing in the birds from far and wide to quench their thirst for nectar.

By late summer, cut off most of the spent flower spike, leaving a few to dry. Once the seeds are ripe, scatter a few here and there to begin a new generation of plants for the future. It is possible to have a few older plants survive (as perennials) for blooming during the following summer.

# Lunaria – Honesty, Money Plant

## Lunaria annua



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As a gardener, a specific plant must have captivated you into later enjoying other exciting flowers. *Lunaria* is my focal point. It was not its purplish flowers but the dried, flattened, oval, transparent seed pods. As a wee-tyke, my older brother and sister convinced (aka “conned”) me into believing they were silver coins made by this plant. It eventually dawned on me they were fooling me. I was always gullible.



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Anyway, these seed pods are what make this plant so unique. But, let's not neglect what makes those seed pods — large clusters of vibrant four-petal violet-purple or white blossoms which bloom the following late spring into mid-summer. They are pollinator attractors since they are filled with nectar.

This plant is a glamorous relative of cabbages, broccoli, and other cruciferous members. While they produce cylindrical seed pods, *Lunaria* decided to outdo all the other kin and make those round seed pods. Talk about botanical curveballs in radical transformations!

Although an everyday staple in yesteryear flower beds, these two-foot-tall-plus plants are rarely grown, nor are seeds available in present garden centers or catalogs. Again, it may be because of its biennial lifestyle, for we need quick amazement. It's time to change this attitude.

Seeds can be purchased from specialty rare-seed online shops and sown in early summer in a sunny or lightly shady, well-drained, fertile bed or border. Potted plants can later be transplanted in late summer.

If you enjoy home decorating with dried floral arrangements, these stem-attached dried seed pods are attention-getters.

# Matthiola – Stocks

## Matthiola incana



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Now we come across a cherished flower garden plant classified as offering us “the best of both worlds.” By this, I mean they can be both splendid flower garden subjects and cut flowers prized by florists.

Some varieties are annuals or biennials, while others “may” become perennial. Some types can survive another growing season if you take the time to cut off most of the spent flowers to prevent life-sapping seed formation.

First, let me give you a quick review of these flowers. Some people purchase stock in the perfume industry. As a gardener, you should get

this botanical stock to provide plenty of fragrance enjoyment. The powerful scent varies from vanilla, nutmeg, spring hyacinths, and lilacs to lilies and Jasmine. Those fragrances are shocking since these plants are in the smelly Mustard family (once again, think of over-cooked Broccoli). These plants are sure to be your best investment for a happier summer!

Classic flowering Stock plants provide plenty of pink, purple, yellow, red, or white single or double-petaled blooms. They begin blooming in spring and last through the end of the summer, offering outstanding color and fragrance for almost the entire growing season.

One commonly grown variety is **Ten Week Stock** (sold in the USA), named for the approximate time to bloom from seed—give or take a few days. It is a garden annual, heavily perfumed, and available in many colors. Growers advise sowing these varieties in mid-spring. Some mixes include the **Double-Flowered Stocks**. They are a favorite since the flowers are sterile, and they keep producing more flowers over the summer and may over winter to provide more enjoyment next summer.

In spring and summer, you can self-sow the seeds in a bed or border. Make sure to grow these plants in a sunny location and well-drained, fertile soil. Most varieties grow to, at most, two feet tall and slightly less wide.

Other varieties, often called “**Brompton Stocks**,” take longer to develop and are treated as biennials. In cool temperate regions, they are generally sown in summer (June and July) to flower in the following spring. The great showy spring floral display compensates for the extra trouble of overwintering the plants. There may be some mortality issues in brutal winters unless a well-drained sheltered site is provided. A south-facing house foundation exposure bed is recommended to temper the harsh, frigid northern winds.

These biennial types have the potential to grow to three feet and are also bushy. These make outstanding and long-lasting cut flowers.

Another type of Stock is **East Lothian** (originating from southern areas of bonny Scotland) cannot decide whether to be annual or biennial. This strain blooms later in the cooler summer and fall.

There is one significant caveat to growing these plants; they tend to dislike hot, muggy summer weather. Most Stock varieties prefer cooler temperatures (generally less than 80 degrees F.) Count on having a splendid spring and early summer display before summer's heat.

# Myosotis - Woodland or Common Forget-Me-Not

*Myosotis sylvatica*



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This is an all-purpose biennial you can raise for general “cottage” gardening, rock gardens, and, more attractive, woodland gardens. Let’s face it — who can turn down growing beautiful blue flowers? This species has five gorgeous sky-blue petals highlighted with yellow centers. Some pink and white varieties are available, but the blue shades are hands down the most popular.

They are hardy biennials (to zone 3 or 4) and prolific self-seeders to the point they may become invasive when conditions warrant but are not

an eyesore. Being short growing, they can spread outward as blue carpets which bloom from spring to early summer. There are other *Myosotis* species available (*M. scorpiodes* and *M. alpestris*) that are perennial and bloom further into summer and early fall, but *sylvatica* is by far the most attractive.

These plants prefer to grow in partly shady, moist, well-drained soil. The general recommendation is the more exposure to sunlight, the more water the plants will need. Deep shade is also not advised, but the Goldilocks Zone is growing in dappled sunlight.

If you are curious about how plants get their names, *Myosotis* is a dandy of a wild name-dropper. It comes from the Greek word meaning “mouse ears.” Mice ears? OK. This plant has several small, “furry,” pointed leaves that someone thought resembled a mouse’s ear.

To further advance the name-game explanation, the common name of “Forget-me-not” apparently is from the story of a Middle Ages German knight (in shining armor, of course) who, while picking bouquets of these flowers near a stream for his fair damsel girlfriend, slipped and fell into the water and drowned. Before his watery demise, he threw his pretty bouquet to her, and, instead of shouting, “*JUST DON’T STAND THERE. HELP ME!*” he began to cry and proclaimed, “*FORGET ME NOT DARLING!*”. And so, the common name stuck probably after law enforcement, investigating this horrible accident, concluded the bereaved damsel was innocent of manslaughter (or, to be precise, knight-slaughter.)

# Oenothera – Evening Primrose

**Oenothera glazioviana; biennis**



Evening Primroses are not related to the actual springtime flowering Primroses. Why they were named for them is anyone's guess, for the blossoms don't look like those of a primrose. No matter; it's another example of amateur botanical misidentification.

This biennial plant is native throughout North America. It has an affinity to grow in disturbed ground — such as abandoned fields, roadsides, drainage ditches, vacant lots, and other less-than-ideal locations. In fertile garden soil, it will grow and bloom exceptionally well. It would be best if you sowed their seeds each spring to establish flowering plants for next year's summer displays.

These plants produce many bright yellow, four-petaled, lovely scented flowers on six-foot-tall-plus branching stalks from early to late summer. Each blossom lasts one night, but more follows each succeeding evening. The whole plant is not a contender for the “best in show” competition of garden plants, for the stalk of spent flowers loses its appeal. Still, the individual blossoms are lovely.

This plant prefers to bloom from dusk until early morning. Unless you can enjoy the sight of these flowers with the high beams of your car’s headlights, your best opportunity is to grow them in a garden near your home.

One such “variety” to admire is **Tina James’s Magical Evening Primrose** (*Oenothera glazioviana*). Years ago, garden writer Tina James popularized this very delightful plant. According to rumors, she hosted Evening Primrose parties showcasing its beautiful flowers.

In the evening, the large, yellow blossoms slowly open (like in time-lapse photography) right before your eyes. I watched the flowers open at 8:30 pm, and ten minutes later, they were fully open. No fooling! The blossoms exude a bedazzling lemon, lily, and honeysuckle blended perfume.

Each plant grows to four feet tall with hundreds of flowers over the summer, so plan a rowdy garden party each evening. Skulking around a garden at night with a flashlight. What can possibly go wrong? Your neighbors may become startled (if not panicky), but they and the subsequent arrival of police officers will eventually understand that we gardeners are peculiar people.

As stated earlier, we consider *Oenothera* a biennial and will flower the following year. Stagger sowing seeds for a couple of years so that some mature plants bloom yearly. All these plants grow well in sunlight to part shade and fertile, well-drained soil. Most species are hardy from zones 3 to 9.

The specific **Tina James** seeds are scarce to locate, but they are “out there — somewhere,” so your best bet is to use an internet search.

Garden centers may not offer potted plants for the species, but seeds may be available in wildflower catalogs.

# Papaver – Field Poppy

## Papaver rhoeas



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This popular species has several common names, including the field poppy, red poppy, and “the common garden poppy.” Its tiny seeds can live for years, waiting for the soil to become disturbed. When so, the seeds quickly germinate, grow, and then bloom into vibrant red flowers the following spring until mid-summer, depending on your location and climate.

Historically, native to southern Europe, especially in locations around the Mediterranean, the plants would thrive in newly plowed cereal crop fields from long-dormant seeds. It eventually became a tragic symbol of

World War I. Known as the Flanders Poppy, it bloomed in the farm fields where soldiers died in battle. They inspired Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae to write his famous poem, "*In Flanders Field*," in 1919.

Although it is a commonly grown poppy, I love how it will pop up here and there in a garden. Years ago, I "dressed up" a drab garden area by sowing many cheap seed packets. It worked well — maybe too well — for millions of young plants always develop by late summer since then, over winter, and in spring erupt into a blaze of red glory lasting for almost two months. All that vivid crimson for the initial investment of only a few inexpensive seed packets and an initial over-winter wait time. If only all garden plants could be this simple. Oh, wait... biennials are pros of doing this!

These Field Poppies are not always bright red. In 1880, the Reverend William Wilks of Shirley, England (a suburb of London) discovered one or more of his red poppies had different shades of color. Being an excellent gardener, Vicar Wilks saved seeds of his unusual variations over the years and planted them. He built up a line of different colors, and they became known as the **Shirley Poppy**. These plants now have vivid yellow, pink, orange, and even white variations, with most having a white "blotch" or base of the petals. New variations are still being bred, including semi and fully-double types, some having lovely bicolors and even gray.

You can find these seeds in many nursery seed catalogs and garden centers.

# Verbascum – Common Mullein

## Verbascum thapsus



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First things first—let’s get the common name pronounced correctly. Pronouncing Latin and common words of plants is always a tongue-twisting experience. The “lein” part helps to misguide many people. The accurate way is to say, “mull - lin.”

Garden-grown Mullein started as a European weed that you usually see growing along roadsides or disturbed waste-ground areas. As a member of the Snapdragon family, it is a biennial with greenish-gray, velvety leaves forming a rosette on the ground.

The second summer forms a six to ten-foot-tall flower spike (also covered with whitish fuzz). Masses of small, bright yellow blossoms cover this spike all summer, producing many seeds. Then, by late fall, the plant dies. It wears itself out by nourishing all those developing flowers and seeds. Breeders have dabbled in developing more colorful varieties with shorter stature. Still, the plants remain a biennial but will reseed each year.

The strange thing about the plant species is the flower spike is the least attractive feature. Yes, it's impressive for its height, but the flowers are not that exciting. It draws your eyes to those green-gray-whitish furry flattened leaves.

Common Mullein grows throughout many areas of the Northern Hemisphere but is not a nuisance weed. Can you grow it in your garden? Yes, it can make a stunning attraction but cut off the flower stalks before the seeds ripen. Here, you can extend the plant's life for another year or two of visual pressure.

# **Viola – Pansy**

## **Viola wittrockiana**



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Pansies are instantly recognizable for their large colorful petals having dark mirror-imaged “blotches,” which, in many people’s minds, refer to as “faces.” It resembles the Rorschach Inkblot Test used in psychology studies. The flower colors are all shades of the rainbow.

We consider this biennial plant a conundrum; in some locations, it grows as an annual and, in others, a short-lived perennial. It depends on your growing zone and how severe the winter temperature is. Actually, several of the above biennials display this hardiness

“uneasiness.” Gardening is always a “cross your fingers and hope for the best” adventure.

As with most, if not all, Violas, pansies prefer to grow and bloom prolifically in cool weather. That is why they are predominantly displayed in most garden centers in the spring. Try as you might, you can’t resist the urge to purchase a few plants to satisfy that need for something colorful at that time. Unfortunately, they begin to suffer by summer, especially during those hot and humid days.

Pansy plants take several weeks to mature and bloom and need to be sown in the fall, develop some growth, and overwinter and bloom in the spring. Again, their survival depends on how severe the winter cold is.

Violas, especially violets, have always been a popularly grown flower for people. So much so that they spurred some enterprising gardeners to dabble in crossbreeding species and varieties into forming new types.

In the early 1800s, an estate owner named Lord Gambier, living near London, asked his hired gardener, William Thomson, to cross-pollinate different violas. Gambier wanted to breed his own new type of viola to brag about to his gardening friends. He got his wish.

One eye-catching plant developed with weird-looking, medium-sized, semi-blotched flowers. I am unsure of the flower color, but the blotchiness was new and had the “WOW!” factor. Mr. Thomson then self-pollinated each generation (over several years — imagine that!), and the flowers became larger in petal and dark blotch. Needless to say, his refined flowers eventually became all the rage to grow.

Historically, the name pansy applied to various *Viola* species, but this more significant multi-colorful flowered type with black blotches became “the modern pansy.”

Throughout the 19th century, pansy shows competed with rose and orchid shows to showcase outstanding new, wildly colorful varieties. Eventually, consumer demand for regular folk to raise pansies took hold, and seed companies soon began developing new strains, which

brings us to the many colorful varieties sold today. Go to any nursery or garden center and see what William Thomson could only imagine.

# Conclusion

Other flowering plants are biennial but are less known to gardeners. An internet search of biennial flowers will bring them to your attention. Most need to be grown from seed, for garden centers will usually not offer them.

You must also realize that some annuals and perennials will act like biennials depending on their growing conditions. For example, *Antirrhinums* (snapdragons), usually classified as annuals, can overwinter if your climate is not harsh and present an impressive display by late spring and into the summer. *Rudbeckia* (Black-eye Susan) will also grow as a biennial in some locations and climate conditions.

Raising biennial flowers is an act of patience, which is frustrating nowadays. We expect instant gratification in all activities, and gardening is not exempt. They can be challenging to accept in any garden since they grow tall and remain vegetative for so long a time until they bloom. You need to be careful and remember they are not weeds to be eliminated.

They have a different way of growing but represent a beautiful way to attract attention to your garden. All it takes is for you to plan, acquire, implement, and have the patience to raise and later see the astonishing beauty these plants will unforgettably provide.

# **Thank you for reading this ebook**

I hope you have enjoyed this ebook on biennial garden flowers

Take the time (and patience) to grow these outstanding flowers in your beds and borders. By next year, you will be glad you did!

Please visit my author website at <https://gedwinvarner.com> for my other gardening ebooks and contact information.

# About the Author

G. Edwin Varner grew up on a farm, helping his father in the crop fields and assisting his mother in the flower and vegetable gardens. This early experience and learning led him to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Botany.

For 20 years, he successfully owned and operated a fragrant-flower mail-order nursery. Unlike most mail-order nurseries, which publish colorful but expensive pictorial catalogs, his frugal catalog extensively described the flowers he grew. He once said, "I write a thousand words worth a picture in my catalogs." Today, he has the same writing style (thankfully with fewer words) across a variety of enjoyable and informative ebooks. This time, the ebooks include color photos of each flower.

He encourages you to cultivate something unique and beautiful in your gardens. His motto is "read about it, see it, grow it, and enjoy it!"

G. Edwin Varner lives in a rural area of northeastern Ohio, USA.