

# Entertaining Garden Flowers

Comical, Unusual, and Beautiful!

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ENTERTAINING GARDEN FLOWERS: COMICAL, UNUSUAL, AND BEAUTIFUL!

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Written by G. Edwin Varner.

# Preface

This informative ebook presents flower garden plants that can add an underused dimension of enjoyable entertainment. Why settle for ordinary beds and borders when you can add a touch of amazement, humor, and conversational levity? The following plants will offer you plenty of additional enjoyment.

Please note: I have copied pertinent information from my previous ebooks, corrected known mistakes, including minor grammatical and spelling errors, and added new material to this ebook.

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

# Introduction

Many flower beds and borders, sorry to say, are downright dull. Each year, the same popular flowering plants are consistently grown and displayed. Yes, they offer a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors, but lack “something else”. That “else” is the addition of unusually shaped blossoms and surprising scents. These “take notice” plants can transform any garden into a memorable one.

The following plants offer additional enjoyment, not only in vibrant petal coloration but also in unusual shapes (some rather embarrassing), sizes, and fragrances. Some plants actually have some surprisingly strange histories! What they all have in common is to add entertainment value to elicit wonder, amusement, and, most importantly, plenty of smiles, not only from yourself but also from visitors admiring your garden.

These flowers will transform any garden from lackluster to interesting, engaging, and especially lively. And best of all, most are easy to find and grow. Be daring and imaginative by adding these plants to transform your flower garden into a remarkably rejuvenated one.

# Alcea — Hollyhock

## Alcea rosea



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A principal representative of the immense Mallow Family, Hollyhocks have grown in herb gardens for centuries. The flower stalks grow tall — most to over six feet — and smaller flower gardens can comfortably accommodate these enjoyable giants. They are easy to raise from seed, grow well in plenty of sunlight, and in well-drained, fertile soil. They can command attention as “show-off plants” for your friends and neighbors. They also served as an essential element of outdoor beautification in years past—especially for concealing rural outhouses or privies.

By 1940, according to a US Census report, only half of the American households had piped-in water for bathing and indoor-installed toilets. In most rural areas, you excuse yourself to use the outhouse. This modest, single-roomed, wooden structure, containing one or two seats (his and hers) and the extensive Sears and Roebuck catalog for reading (and a rear-end-cleaning function for uninteresting pages), created some anxiety and embarrassment for more genteel homeowners, especially the ladies. The gentlemen could not care less. Homeowners planted hollyhocks (and other tall-growing flowers, such as morning glories) to hide the outhouse.

According to written accounts, refined ladies, especially those visiting, would politely ask for directions “...to see *the hollyhocks*.” This was a code for “*Where is your privy, dear?*” The lady-of-the-house would understand and show her guest where they grow. For visitors too embarrassed to ask about the hollyhocks, all they had to do was look around the backyard to see them. Their general vicinity could also be located because of the smell — if you know what I mean. But the embarrassment remained, for everyone knew what someone really wanted to do, and it wasn’t to see tall-growing flowers. It was a delicate social situation at the time.

There were inherent problems with planting these flowers near an outhouse. A major concern is with bees, wasps, and spiders. Bees visited the flowers, while wasps and spiders preferred the outhouse's interior for shelter. Another problem was visiting the outhouse during the winter. Never mind the sub-zero windchill upon your exposed bottom, for you couldn’t say you needed “to admire your hollyhocks” when they were all dead. I suppose people had to “hold it” until they arrived home to occupy their own icy outhouse.

You may not realize it, but we would still need permission to see the hollyhocks without modern indoor plumbing and a bathroom or restroom. God bless all plumbers!

# Anagallis — Blue Pimpernel; Italian Pimpernel

*Anagallis monellii* “Skylover”



In 1905, Baroness Emma Orczy (her full name was Emma Magdalena Rozália Mária Jozefa Borbála Orczy de Orci — (yikes, no wonder she shortened it) — wrote and published a historical book about the Reign of Terror at the start of the French Revolution entitled *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

The main character, a flamboyant Englishman named Sir Percy Blakeney, acts like a Zorro superhero by rescuing people sentenced to death via “Madam Guillotine.” He is a master of disguise and escapes death-defying encounters.

He adopts a red flower, *Anagallis arvensis*, better known as a scarlet pimpernel, as his secret identity “nickname” — just like *Spiderman*, the *Green Hornet*, and *Batman* are today. Sir Percy would have made a bigger or more powerful statement of his hero status if he had used *Anagallis monellii* or the Blue Pimpernel instead.

This plant is a traffic-stopper in full bloom, with hundreds of intense, ultra-true-blue flowers for the entire summer. A native of the Mediterranean region, this maintenance-free plant thrives in dry, sunny locations. It would appreciate fertile, well-drained soil and occasional watering for better growth and bloom, but don't fuss over it.

Look for the “**Skylover Blue**” variety (an ideal name!), which grows only a foot tall, branches off in all directions, and makes an outstanding border, bedding, and container plant. If only it were hardy—only to Zone 9—but it is an annual in most gardens.

All superheroes have minor character flaws; this prolific bloomer is no exception. Like its close cousin, *Anagallis arvensis* mentioned above, both species close their petals at dusk, when the day is cloudy, or when a thunderstorm nears. Both species share the common nickname “Poor Man's Barometer.” These plants prefer to bask in the bright sunlight. Then again, don't we all?

# **Aristolochia — Dutchman's Vine; Calico Vine**

**Aristolochia gigantea; littoralis or Aristolochia elegans**



Most species of this vine originate in tropical areas of Central and South America. Once discovered by European explorers (and exploiters), these vines spread to warmer regions worldwide. Later, hybridization would create new, even more unusual and exotic forms.

There are hundreds of species scattered worldwide, but they all have a similar flower structure. They differ in size and color, but they resemble meerschaum pipes. "What's that?" you may ask. They are large smoking pipes, once famous in the Netherlands and throughout Europe.

Depending on the species, the flowers vary from small, yellowish-green to large, deep brown-purple with white or yellowish veins. The petal colors resemble a slab of meat left out in the scorching sun. The blossom also has a noticeable “rotten meat” or carrion-corpse aroma. Guess what pollinates these flowers? Flies. This vine fools them into thinking they are about to enjoy a rotten meat feast and a great place to lay their eggs. Sorry, flies, it will not happen. Thank goodness!

These are great vines to grow and to admire in any garden. Don't worry about my description of rotting meat and flies. You will notice none of this — unless you stick your nose deep inside the flowers.

Our imagination of the flower's appearance can go further. The old Latin name of this vine roughly translates to “the best way to have childbirth.” Wait one minute. Weird-looking smoking pipes and birthing babies? Yes, go figure!

The flower's appearance somewhat resembles a human fetus in a womb. Ancient people would extract juices from these flowers to help deliver babies pain-free. If you want to become a do-it-yourself midwife, don't try this method. The reason is that the fluid and extracts are toxic. How mothers, and I would also assume babies, lived after being administered this “brew” is mind-boggling.

Hardy from zones nine and above, they grow best in full to partial sunlight, fertile, moist, and well-drained soils. Under the best conditions, they can grow to well over 20 feet tall. Even in temperate regions, gardeners can grow them as annuals, with strong growth and abundant blossoms. Flowering continues for most of the summer until the coolness of fall.

Like many other vines, this plant can cover trellises, fences, arbors, posts, and any other tall supporting structure. They can grow well in containers (with support) and reach about 8 feet tall. The dark green leaves are heart-shaped and display the annoying habit of hiding the flowers—part of the time, at least.

# Berlandiera — Chocolate Daisy

*Berlandiera lyrata*



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For all fellow chocoholics, this rare plant has a noticeable chocolate or hot cocoa aroma. You can smell this delectable fragrance many feet away when several flowers are in full bloom. Please note that this plant

blooms from late evening through mid-morning. Afterward, it closes its petals for the rest of the day.

Plan your evenings or early morning by visiting this flower. If your first cup of coffee cannot wake you up, the delicious scent of hot cocoa will.

When I first grew (and later wrote about) this plant, I did not realize it bloomed late in the evening and released its yummy aroma. I always noticed it was in full bloom by the early morning when visiting the garden after my long night's nap. Within a few hours after sunrise, the petals were tightly closed. Understandably, I was not especially impressed with this plant.

A few years later, I realized this plant is a night owl, attracting moths with its yellow flowers and treating them to nectar. If it smells of chocolate to us, I wonder if it does to them—and if it tastes like it? We may never know.

The small daisy-like blossoms are bright yellow with reddish stripes or veins on the underside of the petals. Dark red stamens and silvery-green leaves complement their appearance. The plant is less than two feet tall but becomes bushy over the summer.

It grows well in full sunlight and requires well-drained soil. It begins blooming by midsummer. Collect seeds or dig up the tubers before winter if you live in colder locations.

Although I list it as annual, it can be perennial in zones 7-10. Try to protect the tubers over the winter in these locations with mulch. Unfortunately, it's difficult to survive in the lower zones of gardens.

# Calceolaria — Pocketbook Plant; Slipper Flower; Pouch Flower

*Calceolaria x herbeohybrida*



The reason for these nicknames is the annual's unusual flower shape. It depends on your perspective — almost like a physiological response. My sister, a retired nurse, says the flowers look like colorful bedpans. Only a nurse could describe these flowers in this unique way. Perhaps this is a reason she prefers not to grow them. The pocketbook analogy (supposedly for I am clueless about antique purses) is from the 1960s to early 1970s era one-piece purse. The pouch and slipper references speak for themselves.

Not all flowers sold in garden centers are adaptable for growing in a bed or border. Usually grown as potted plants rather than bedding plants, *Calceolaria* is sensitive to outdoor temperatures. They prefer cooler growing conditions and will suffer in hot, humid conditions. This is understandable, as they are native to the high elevations of the Andes Mountains.

There are many species, with many more hybrid varieties available from seed companies. Greenhouse-grown potted plants will provide you with a few weeks of colorful splendor on a windowsill, patio table, or in a large container placed on a deck. These plants prefer partly shaded locations (early-morning sunshine is ideal) and well-drained, fertile potting soil. Unlike most other annual plants, this ten-inch-tall plant blooms from early spring until midsummer. Afterward, as temperatures steadily rise, flower production declines.

When the flowers bloom, you can see them a mile away. The fused petals are brightly colored in yellow, red, and orange, sometimes with black spots for contrast.

Look for the variety *Calceolaria x herbeohybrida* **Orange Red Eye** (shown above). It is in the new **Calynopsis®** lineage, having larger flowers and taller stems. This new group of plants looks stunning in spring-offered potted plants.

The Calynopsis® varieties bloom longer—most extend into late summer—when grown in shady, cool conditions. This hybrid line has the potential for outdoor bedding. Still, the best option is to grow them in containers and enjoy them. Here, you can admire each blossom close-up. Once you appreciate these flowers' intense colors, you may become addicted to growing them each year.

# Canna

## *Canna indica* and many hybrids



If you desire to add a tropical feel to your flower gardens, you can't go wrong with including these colorful plants. Their striking flowers and large leaves provide visual appeal.

Many varieties feature variegated leaves that resemble stained-glass windows backlit by the sun. Some gardeners shyly confess that they enjoy these leaves more than the flowers. Still, the flowers offer plenty of "eye candy" colors. Several other varieties showcase brilliant yellow, pink, red, and orange shades intermixed with white stripes and splotches. Strangely, botanists (and growers) discovered that no pure white-flowered species or variety exists.

Cannas are native to tropical and subtropical regions of Central and South America. Over time, different species became “transplanted” into the world’s temperate and other tropical areas. These plants are popular for their ease of culture and adaptability, allowing them to form hybrids and grow in any garden.

Grown from thick rhizomes, their ultimate height, based on how tall the flower stalk grows, can extend up to eight feet or more, depending on the variety.

All Cannas prefer full to partial sunlight and consistently moist, highly fertile soil in the garden or containers. These plants thrive in humid conditions but require regular watering during droughts.

Cold-region gardeners (below zone 8) have had splendid success growing these plants by planting the rhizomes in larger containers and setting them outside after the last frost. By fall, bring these pots indoors for the winter. By withholding water during this time, you simulate natural dormancy for the rhizomes.

The critical question is, which tall-growing Canna can you plant? New types are created annually, and many reach “acceptably comfortable” levels. If you wish to grow a couple of giants, consider growing ‘**Pretoria**,’ also called ‘**Bengal Tiger**,’ which has stunning orange flowers with yellow-striped (or green-striped?) foliage. It can grow to 8 feet tall or more. ‘**Tropicanna**’ (shown above) has unique multi-colored variegated leaves highlighted with large, orange flowers. It can exceed 8 feet tall when fully established. When the sun shines through those giant leaves, the sight is AMAZING!

# Cardiospermum — Love-in-a-Puff

## *Cardiospermum halicacabum*



The other name, though less cute, is Balloon Vine, and it grows in many tropical and subtropical locations. Recorded as being discovered or first-grown in the early 19th century, there is some confusion about its original home – possibly from Mexico to Central and South America, but also found in equatorial Africa and parts of India.

The tiny white blossoms are insignificant, but their seed “capsules” are the main attraction. They are puffy, air-filled, papery coverings similar to tomatillo fruit. These inflated, green balloons that turn brown (when ripe) dangle from the extensive vines.

What's this love business have to do with this vine? Take a look at the seeds!



They are small, round, black, but have the unmistakable shape or imprint of a white heart. This shape corresponds to the attachment point of each of the three seeds to the vine. The genus botanical name, 'Cardiospermum' translates (from Latin) as 'cardio' meaning heart and 'spermum' meaning seed or seed-related.

No wonder this vine became famous for the affairs of the heart. During and after Queen Victoria's reign, a popular method of communication in the Middle East was "The Language of Flowers." Many flowers have different behavioral meanings associated with emotions, ideas, and attitudes. All of these secretive, hidden meanings became associated with flowers. Love-in-a-Puff represented "hidden love" – yes, from the concealed heart-shaped seeds inside the balloon. Gee, I wonder what the Skunk Cabbage flowers represent? Okay, best we do not know.

Hardy in zones 9 to 11, the plant thrives in sunny, fertile areas, weaving its thin vines through other shrubs, trellises, and other supports. As usual, all this weaving and climbing can become invasive. The vines can become so weedy that they smother other plants, causing them to collapse. This has occurred in many subtropical areas where the vine has escaped its natural growing regions. Talk about an 'achy-breaky' heart!

Gardeners can take heart: this vine is grown as an annual and does not spread with such wild abandon. It may be challenging to find, but try sourcing seeds from companies that sell rare varieties.

## Cassia — Popcorn Cassia

*Cassia didymobotrya* or *Senna didymobotrya*



This plant is becoming better known as garden centers gradually offer more unknown flowers to adventurous gardeners. Native to Africa, this plant has vivid yellow, pea-like blossoms on long spikes. The top unopened buds on each end are black or dark purple.

The real surprise with this plant is that its leaves smell like hot, buttered popcorn when rubbed between your fingers. You may feel the need to lick your buttery fingers, but don't do it. Garden critters such as bugs, bunnies, and deer dislike this leaf odor and may also dislike its taste.

It is only a hardy perennial in zones 9 to 11, but is classified as a shrub or small tree in tropical Africa. Elsewhere, it is classified as an annual. The plant prefers full sun and well-drained, fertile soil to produce abundant summer blooms.

You can find seeds in catalogs or online, and you may be lucky to see potted plants in garden centers.

This one will be at the top of the list to spark “flower lust” at your next garden club meeting. To jump-start member interest, bring a bag of hot, buttered popcorn.

# **Celosia — Cockscomb or Wool Flowers**

***Celosia argentea* var. *cristata*; *plumosa*; *spicata***



I live near several Amish communities. During the summer, when they hold their weekly livestock and auction sales, I will see Amish women selling bouquets of these highly colorful but unusual-looking flowers. At other times, they sell them at roadside stands near their homes. While traveling around, you can see their gardens or the outside boundaries of farm fields dotted with the glowing colors of these and other flowers.

I never understood why they grew so many of them. Maybe it is as simple as Celosia's common name of cockscomb or wool-flowers that attracts the Amish. A garden flower resembling the fleshy crest on roosters or sheep's wool? Hey, why not? Well, anyway, they sell plenty of them. Good for you, ladies!

Celosia resembles something germinated from a Dr. Seuss book! Aside from being exceptionally pretty, the different species and varieties vary in color, size, and shape, but all appear velvety. In Mexico, for example, they are known as “Velvet Flowers.”

There are three species (and assorted hybrids) of Celosia flowers:

- For many people, the *Celosia argentea* var. *cristata* varieties feature brightly colored, rounded, folded, brain-shaped flowers on tall stems. A popular color is blood red or purplish-red — the reason for naming Celosia as cockscombs.
- Another species is *spicata*, which has smaller but abundant, spiky flowers resembling wheat heads.
- And third, the species called *plumosa*, whose tiny flowers are airy, feathery, or resemble flames.

There is a wide variety to choose from, either by seed or by purchasing plants at garden centers. Raising them from seed is time-consuming, so if you live in colder climates, your best option is to buy plants.

All Celosias prefer sunny locations with well-drained soil. They dislike constant moist ground and clay-based soils. Adding sand or coarse gravel to a bed will help establish well-grown plants and abundant flowers for the picking.

# Ceratotheca — South African Foxglove

## *Ceratotheca triloba*



Not related to the biennial foxglove (*Digitalis*), this curious, fuzzy annual plant has similar-shaped blossoms, only more substantial and less colorful. The petals are pure white or a delightful, creamy lavender with violet stripes within the elongated throat.

Related to Snapdragons (*Antirrhinum*), this plant is native to South Africa and hardy in zones 9-10. This plant can grow to over six feet in a fertile flower bed, but is usually much less tall. It makes an excellent show in a large container and is easily controlled in height.

Plant it in full to partial sunlight in fertile, well-drained soil to maximize summer flowering. It will bloom into the fall if you periodically trim off

the developing seed-pod stems. It is also drought-tolerant, so you do not need to worry about watering it if you are away for an extended period.

Imported as seeds into the United States in 1805, this annual plant never became well known to American gardeners for some unexplained reason. In Victorian England, it became the rage in the British gardening society and later... forgotten. Growing it, at that time, must have been a 'fad.'

After becoming bored with it, gardeners became obsessed with raising other unusual flowers. All gardeners have a psychological condition similar to 'shiny object syndrome,' but here it is called 'pretty flower syndrome.' We always gravitate toward the newest, most beautiful flowers to grow and enjoy.

You cannot find these plants in garden centers, but larger seed companies will have seeds available. Don't worry; this plant is easy to grow from seed and to raise to enjoy its beautiful, eye-catching flowers.

# Cleome — Spider Flower

## Cleome hassleriana



Gardeners often call this plant the Spider Flower, Spider Legs Flower, or Spider Plant because the elongated stamens radiate from the colorful petals. The plants grow upright as spikes rather than as bushy plants. It's common for them to grow to nearly six feet tall by fall. During this time, they bloom for most of the summer. The flowers can be white, light to dark pink, or lavender-purple. Some varieties are bi-colored, pink and white, or pale lavender-purple and white. Older types typically have a light fragrance, but the scent is generally disliked.

Cleome was once a favorite annual for flower gardens, providing much-needed color and height, but tastes and preferences have changed. Today, several other annuals have provided greater enjoyment. Perhaps

it is the flowers' appearance, their ever-growing height, unappealing scent, abundant seed production, or all of these combined factors that have gradually reduced their acceptance in flower beds or borders. Whatever the faults, one acceptable quality is that the plant looks enjoyable and memorable.

This plant prefers full sun to partial shade and well-drained soil. Sow seeds indoors, but germination is better if planted outdoors in early spring, where they will bloom. The plants will self-seed, and numerous seedlings will sprout next spring.

They are beautiful, and children will enjoy watching them grow and bloom — especially when hummingbirds and butterflies feed on the flowers' nectar. You can reliably find seeds at many garden centers and in catalogs.

# Clitoria — Butterfly Pea Vine

*Clitoria ternatea*



If this ebook had the same rating system as movies and television shows, it might include something like this: “*Rated PG-13. Parental guidance is advised.*” What makes this vine so unique to allow such a cautionary rating?

Even with the basic Sweet Pea-style look, the flower's structure has evolved a 'somewhat' resemblance to human female genitals—precisely, the clitoris. Now is the time to smile and giggle. Okay, let's calm our vivid imaginations and admire the profound beauty of these blossoms. That stunning, bright sky-blue color of the petals is so eye-catching.

It is native to tropical regions of Malaysia, Thailand, and other parts of Asia. Around 1739, explorers shipped seeds back home as soon as possible to show off, brag about, and talk about those “alluring” blue petals. Cue more smiles, giggles, and mumblings again.

Today, this plant grows wild in many tropical regions worldwide. It doesn't appear invasive—surprising, for many vines can become so in non-native regions of the world—the tendrils twirl about, wrapping around any supporting structure. Under ideal growing conditions, such as plenty of sunlight and fertile, moist soil, it can reach over 10 feet tall. It is not a giant, but it makes a great, fast-growing, long-blooming annual.

Seeds are difficult to source, but a few well-known seed companies have some in stock. A rare pure-white form is also available—somewhere.

# Colocasia — Elephant Ears

*Colocasia esculenta*



Prepare yourself for being amazed, awed, and slightly overwhelmed when you first encounter this plant. I had mixed feelings when I first encountered it at a garden center. Its enormous height and the massive leaves and flowers thrilled but also partially intimidated me. I felt like Lemuel Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. It was when he encountered the land and its giant people, the Brobdingnagians. This plant is amazing!

Growers nickname it "Elephant Ears" or "Taro." The leaves have a coarse texture with prominent veins, but some have exciting leaf colors. Some varieties have the usual green, but many have bronze and "almost" pure black (dark purple) leaves.



Like the leaves, clusters of large, white arum-like flowers are larger than usual. The flower has a modified leaf called a spathe, and the stamens or pistils are on the central yellow spadix. A slightly foul odor associated with these types of flowers attracts pollinating flies.

Elephant ears are easy to grow from bulbs. They can be planted in the garden (remember, they need plenty of space) or in large pots, such as halved whiskey barrels.

To reach its maximum size, it prefers fertile, well-drained soil, plenty of water and fertilizer, and full sunlight rather than partial shade. The bulbs are hardy from zones 8 to 11, but a freeze will kill the outermost leaves. Northern growers must bring the potted bulbs indoors or to a heated garage for the winter.

These bulbs are available at many larger garden centers and online bulb specialty nurseries.

# Cosmos — Chocolate Cosmos

## *Cosmos atrosanguineus*



There is a famous line in the 1993 movie *Jurassic Park* where actor Jeff Goldblum's character, Dr. Ian Malcolm, says, "No. I'm, I'm simply saying that life, uhh... finds a way." Although he was referring to the discovery that supposedly sterile dinosaurs quickly developed a genetic mechanism for reproduction, this fascinating plant also has a similar plan of overcoming supposed sterility. At least we don't have to worry about velociraptors lurking about in the garden.

Native to Mexico, this plant was once common but became very rare. What happened? In the past, all available plants eventually lost the ability to produce seeds. They became sterile and needed to be propagated by cuttings or tubers—until now. In 2010, a plant was

discovered to be fertile, producing viable seed. Never underestimate Mother Nature! Now, seeds are gradually becoming available to private and commercial companies.

Look out for **Chocamocha**, which was first commercially seed-grown in 2012. This attractive plant is a tender perennial that resembles a small Dahlia and grows like one, but with flowers similar to regular Cosmos. The milk chocolate-scented blossoms are a deep garnet or crimson red but appear almost black. It blooms in midsummer until a killing frost. It forms small finger-like tubers that can be dug and saved over the winter in slightly moist peat moss.

Plant them in full sunlight and in fertile, well-drained soil. These plants can be grown in containers, so you can place them where you can enjoy their delicious fragrance.

# Craspedia — Drumstick Flower; Billy Balls

## *Craspedia globosa*



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When you think of Australia and New Zealand, you immediately visualize their marsupial animals, such as kangaroos, koala bears, and Tasmanian Devils. Hey, let's also include the egg-laying mammal, the duck-billed platypus. But how many times do you think of their wild-looking wildflowers? Probably, never. That is a shame because these regions have fascinating native flowers.

Presented here is one such delightful botanical oddity. No, I shouldn't label it that way. Let's call it a pleasant curiosity. No, this is not a

marsupial plant.

*Craspedia* is a down-under member of the immense daisy family, appearing as yellow ping-pong balls stuck on stems. This impressionistic view is not an exaggeration.

Suspended on stiff, wiry stems above clumps of grass-like silvery-green leaves are the perfectly spherical flower-heads. These flower-heads, extending upward to almost two feet, have no ray-florets (like the large petal-like flowers of a daisy) but only the fertile florets congested within the head.

Most heads are an inch or more in diameter, but a clump of these flowers waving in the breeze all summer is mesmerizing. Florists highly value them as cut flowers for contrasting (and conversation-starting) displays.

These plants are easy to grow from seed and, once established in the garden, are practically carefree. They thrive in full sun and well-drained, fertile soil. Although hardy in the Australian regions, they are annuals if you live below zone 8.

You will have better luck finding seeds (and possibly plants) at online nurseries other than at your local garden center.

# Crinum — Giant Spider Lily

## Crinum x amabile



Although the name suggests a lily, this bulb is related to the Christmas Amaryllis and Hippeastrum families. The "spider" name is for the long, pink-to-red petals and stamens extending several inches from the flower stalk. Another stunning feature is the leaves' dark green to purple coloration. In a shady spot, the leaves arch over, forming the shape of a giant spider. Yes, it appears so exotic, but, being a tropical plant, it should be!

This bulb and its relations are native to tropical areas of Asia. It is bulb-hardy in zones 9 to 11, but a rare winter freeze will kill the top growth. Most gardeners should plant this bulb in large pots or containers and store it indoors in winter.

It is a favorite landscape plant in warm, frost-free locations. As the plant ages, the flower stalk (inflorescence) can reach over five feet. It blooms all summer with a sweet, lily-like fragrance. It loves to grow in partial shade in fertile, well-drained soil. However, it may be challenging to find these bulbs in garden centers.

## Cuphea — Bat Face Cuphea; Tiny Mice Cuphea llavea “Torpedo”



If there is one plant I will grow each year, it will be this gorgeous variety. My first attraction was its vivid red and purple colors. The second attraction is the name; the flowers really do look like a bat's face and ears. I think I can see some fangs jutting from the mouth.

Another “cute” name is Tiny Mice. They apparently resemble small mice, especially with the “large ears,” but my eyes cannot distinguish this appearance. Now that you mention it, by adding wings to a mouse, it will look like a bat. No matter what color these blossoms are, you will enjoy their constant blooming from late spring to fall frost.



Native to Mexico (zones nine and above), “**Torpedo**” can grow to over three feet tall and wide (oh what a sight that would be), but for our garden, it can only muster as a low-growing annual shrub.

Blooming abundantly over the summer, it can become an excellent addition for bedding and edging a border. These inch-long tubular blossoms draw in all the neighborhood hummingbirds and butterflies. Planting them in containers, especially hanging baskets, provides for greater eye-level appeal.

No matter where you plant them, make sure they are basking in plenty of sunlight and well-drained, fertile soil. These plants dislike shade and will not bloom.

You can purchase potted plants of this variety from larger garden centers and online nursery websites. You can grow other varieties from seed (if you can locate some), but they will take longer to grow and bloom.

# Dianthus — Pinks and Carnations

## Dianthus superbus



Do yourself a favor and grow this incredible plant. Prepare yourself for an enjoyable, colorful, and scented treat for your eyes and nose.

*Dianthus superbus* may be the most fragrant, with a glorious, heavenly, delicious, nasal-intoxicating, oh-so-wonderfully sweet lilac perfume that will drift across your garden throughout many summer evenings. I hope I made my point clear with that excessively long sentence.

This species has several types of petals: white, pink, purple, or red; some fringed, some feathery, some freaky-looking. Feel the need to be wild and crazy in your evening garden? Here is your chance to grow this flamboyant plant.

Christopher Lloyd also once stated he would never want to be without this plant in his gardens. In her book *The Scented Garden*, garden writer and author Rosemary Verey declared this plant as “... *the ultimate in perfection in garden scents...*” Wow! What better referrals can you ask for in hiring this plant to bloom in your garden?

The plants can grow to almost two feet tall but are bushy. Try to grow as many plants as possible (from seed) to perfume the entire garden.

Grow the seed-grown variety called the “**Rainbow Loveliness Strain**”, a selection shown above. It wins my nomination for the outstanding perfume plant of the evening garden border. A British Dianthus breeder crossed the Dianthus species *superbus* and *barbatus* (Sweet Williams). The result was this unique ‘hybrid.’ It has the Sweet Williams’ multi-clustered bloom but with the *superbus* species’ flower shape and perfume. You get the best of both worlds in this plant. The scent is tooth-decaying sweet — some clove, but more like lilac. They release this perfume in prodigious quantities and can drift in the summer evening air.

The feathery flowers will smother the bushy plant. One drawback is that it eventually produces numerous seeds, which cause the plant to stop producing more flowers. After the main flush of blooms ends, clip off the flower stems to encourage the plant to produce more flowers a couple of weeks later. Obviously, this is a workhorse of a plant.

# Dicentra — Old-Fashioned Bleeding Heart

*Dicentra spectabilis* or *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*



Once known as *Dicentra* (and still is with us diehard gardeners), botanists now classify this outstanding spring-blooming, hardy perennial as *Lamprocapnos*. I'm sorry, but this name sounds like a newly discovered dinosaur fossil or a comical beast straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. No, I will stick with the old name.

Time for an off-beat botanical history lesson. Who knows – it may come in handy someday, but I doubt it. This delightful plant was first introduced to Europe in the 1840s by the Scottish plant hunter-

explorer-extraordinaire Robert Fortune. Bobby had a knack for going to out-of-the-way worldly places. One day, he came across this charming perennial growing in China, thought it looked pretty, and brought it back home.

Bobby had a darker side to him, and it involved being a spy — no, not your James Bond style of snooping but of seeking and pilfering (spy-talk for stealing) tea plants out of China. The British East India Company hired him to travel to China, get friendly with the locals, admire their gardens and their pretty flowers, and, when no one was looking, stuff a few Oriental botanical treasures into his pockets or bags. And, if, by chance, he was to visit a tea plantation — which was his real mission — steal as many potted tea plants or cuttings as possible without the workers (and royalty) finding out. You don't steal in China under the penalty of imprisonment, or, at that time, death. This plan sounds like a garden writer's screenplay for a *Mission: Impossible* movie. Spoiler alert — he succeeded in his mission. We got pretty plants for our gardens and refreshing tea to sip while admiring them.

For a postscript of this historical account, growers shipped *Dicentra* plants to the United States and Canada in the late 1800s. Loved by the public, florists grew it as potted gifts for Valentine's Day. Isn't that sweet? Who said history is boring? It depends on the subject and the people involved!

*Dicentra* is hardy in zones 2 to 9 and grows well in partial to full shade in your garden. It looks great when planted in a woodland setting and is trouble-free if planted in moist, well-drained, fertile soil. Dry soil and hot sun lead to poor flowering and premature dormancy. It is this dormancy that "turns people off" in growing it, for they expect flowers all the time. Sorry, but enjoy the colorful blossoms when they bloom in the spring. The leaves are dark green, while some varieties have a delightful blue-green coloration.

The flowers' common name perfectly describes them. The heart-shaped "puffy" blossoms are usually pink, rose-red, or pure white. The pink and red ones are the most stunning, for they resemble a broken heart with

the bottom showing a large drop of white blood (think of it as blood plasma). Don't worry — a few varieties show crimson red drops, giving these flowers a jolt of *NCIS* realism. In some ways, it looks semi-ghastly but is a well-constructed, charming little flower! As you may suspect, this plant has several varieties with many exciting variations.

There are other colorful species available. One, *Dicentra eximia*, or the Fringed Bleeding Heart, is a wildflower native to the eastern parts of the United States. It is longer-blooming (potentially all summer in shady areas), but the smaller blooms lack the more noticeable heart-shaped characteristics of the Old-Fashioned Bleeding Heart. The leaves of *Dicentra eximia* are deeply cut, fern-like, and last all season. You can find both species in many garden centers and online nurseries.

# Dictamnus — Gas Plant

**Dictamnus fraxinella albus; roseus**



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Here is a plant with several other names, including 'Fraxinella,' 'Dittany,' 'Lemon Bush,' and 'Burning Bush.' The names reflect specific characteristics of this plant. It was an old cottage-garden favorite, but it is now less well known. Times and people change, and no flower remains a constant favorite.

It is a vigorous, bushy plant with three-foot-tall spikes of *Alstroemeria*-like flowers in white or deep rose-pink, with deeper veins. The blossoms, stems, and leaves produce a volatile oil (gas) that smells like a strong lemon or citrus perfume. On warm, still, dark summer evenings, when, under specific conditions, the invisible gas surrounding

the plant will briefly ignite a flash of blue flame when lit by a match. This flame is more flash than a bang, for it doesn't harm the plant.

A pertinent question is: How did someone discover this ability? According to bizarre historical accounts, gardeners throughout the ages have occasionally observed certain aromatic plants sparkle or emit a bluish flame at night, usually when thunderstorms are nearby. The idea is that static electricity ignites the gas. Later versions have some intrigued gardeners using matches to "speed the reaction along." All these witnesses report that the plants in question emit an intense floral perfume or have a strong leafy scent.

Trying to trigger a blue flame never worked for me. I do not consider myself desperate enough to engage in "botanical pyromania," so I will not try it again. I am concerned that the neighbors will call the police to report a suspicious individual who roams at night and sets garden plants on fire. No-thank-you. I'll just enjoy that lemony perfume and those beautiful flowers.

This plant provides excellent cut flowers and is very hardy in zones 3 to 9. It is happy to grow in full to partial sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil.

Once planted and root-established, *Dictamnus* resents transplanting, so make sure you know where you want it to grow permanently. Like peonies, this plant can live for many years.

# Dracunculus — Dragon Arum; Dragon Lily; Voodoo Lily

*Dracunculus vulgaris* or *Arum dracunculus*



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How can I describe this plant in a gentlemanly and “cultured” way?  
Some flowers include references to human reproductive anatomy. This

tuberous perennial has a more masculine appearance. Another common name coined by a famous mail-order nursery (*Plant Delights Nursery*) is Viagra Lily. I am not falling into that trap of describing this name. Don't worry — this plant (and my description) is relatively tame compared to another “he-man” plant embarrassingly discussed later. This is a warning of what's to come.

Occasionally, you may read or see on TV a news-fluff piece about a large tuberous Arum Lily plant, called a Corpse Flower (*Amorphophallus titanum*), blooming in a botanical garden greenhouse. Not only is this plant large, weirdly colorful, and, ahh... “erect,” but it also smells terrible, like a decomposing human body. That's what people usually describe, for I hope never to encounter a “dear departed” in such a state. Anyway, it always draws people to ogle and giggle — something nobody does when viewing a petunia.

Although being much smaller in size and girth, the Dragon Lily can grow in your flower bed. Granted, it may not be an attention-grabber, laughter-laced, last news item for the six o'clock Action News show, but it can be a curiosity plant for the entire neighborhood.

Hardy in zones six and above, it is native to northern Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and central Middle Eastern locations. Gardeners in lower zones can still plant it in the garden, but will need to dig up and store it over the winter before the ground freezes. Container growing is also an excellent option for enjoyment. Treat these tubers like you would for Dahlias.

This perennial grows from tubers (modified stems that store energy like bulbs) and extends long, fan-shaped, dark green leaves. These divided leaves have a “somewhat” appearance of a dragon's claw — thus the common dragon name. These plants are not true lilies, but they are often called lilies because they have tuberous or bulbous roots.

By midsummer, a fleshy, open vase-shaped fusion of petals, called the spathe, emerges. Extending upward from inside it is the spadix, a long, slender, purplish-black flower stalk. Some people call it the dragon's tail. Fortunately, I have found no mention of it being called “something

else” of a male dragon. This structure contains both the stamens and pistils, but they usually develop at different times to prevent self-fertilization.

This inflorescence releases a foul odor—not an immediate neighborhood-evacuation order in intensity, but not overly horrible. This odor lasts for a day or two, which attracts flies, the flower’s pollinators. Growers advise against planting this arum near open windows or where you spend time outdoors. Both the smell and the flies may prove troublesome. Unsuspecting non-gardeners may suspect you have a hygiene issue or that your sewer system is clogged.

So, where can you plant this smelly dragon? It prefers shady, fertile, and moist (but not boggy) areas. It can tolerate partial sunlight but not constant exposure. Older, well-grown plants can reach three feet tall, but expect smaller-scale results.

# Eryngium — Sea Holly

## *Eryngium maritimum*



If you wish to add some decorative bling to your flower borders, this hardy perennial should do the trick. The common name is fitting, given the plant's waxy, spiny, thistle-like leaves and its naturalization in sandy coastal locations. You don't have to live near the seaside, for these plants will adapt well to rock gardens or borders supplemented with gravel-enhanced garden soil. The leaves are usually silvery-gray, while some varieties have an attractive blue tint.

Magnificent colorful varieties are available, such as **Blue Jackpot**, **Big Blue**, and even a smaller type called **Blue Hobbit** (usually found in Middle-Earth nurseries—sorry, a lame *Lord of the Rings* joke), which has a beautiful blue coloration. Various nursery sources refer to the

color as “electric blue.” That should spark some interest in purchasing them.

The flower heads and surrounding bracts also have a shiny appearance, with some varieties more so. They look like large ice crystals or snowflakes.

Hardy from zone 5 and up, Sea Holly is native to sun-soaked coastal beaches of Europe. Clumps of plants can grow to 3 feet tall and wide and bloom from midsummer through fall.

Exposed to the harsh sun and salt spray, the entire plant adapts to overheating and water loss by secreting a waxy, reflective 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 they are being stolen for flower gardens. This does not have to be the case, since you can quickly grow attractive varieties from seed or purchased nursery plants.

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

# **Fritillaria — Crown Imperial; Snake's Head Lily**

## ***Fritillaria imperialis; Fritillaria meleagris and other species***

We should not forget our spring-blooming bulbs, which offer unusual flowers that make us stare in disbelief. Yes, our standard daffodils and tulips (especially the flamboyant Parrot varieties) display striking coloration, but lesser-known bulbs can also provide a sense of amazement.

One such group is the lily-like *Fritillaria* bulb species. As spring-blooming bulbs, they are planted in the fall and thrive in full sun and fertile, well-drained soil. Like tulips, they need the soil to remain semi-dry during the summer. That can be difficult to achieve, as many other ornamental plants occupying the same real estate space may not tolerate that condition. Consider planting additional herbaceous plants that tolerate drier soil in summer and fall.

Below are two representative species that highlight unusual floral characteristics that have endeared them to generations of gardeners.

### ***Fritillaria imperialis* or Crown Imperial**



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What immediately becomes apparent about this 4-foot-tall stemmed plant is the bell-shaped, reddish-orange or lemon-yellow flowers hanging upside down underneath pineapple-like leaf bracts throughout May and into June. You certainly do not see that every day or in every garden.

This species is historically dated to around 1665 and still makes most botanically observant people stop, stare, and broadly smile, evoking intense curiosity. It is hardy in zones 5 to 8 and thrives in full sun and well-drained, fertile soil. Please ensure the soil does not retain water, as this can cause the bulbs to rot. A soil that remains mostly dry throughout the summer (I know, this sounds absurd) will keep this amazing plant around for several years.

Reports indicate that, although the bulbs are large, they can be easily damaged, especially if disturbed while in the ground. It is best to find a

permanent spot in the garden and to avoid digging them up or damaging them when planting other bulbs or plants.

Also, please be aware that all parts of this plant have an unfortunate, slightly noticeable odor reminiscent of *Mephitis mephitis*, commonly known as the North American striped skunk. Pepé Le Pew would love it. Now, this is one entertaining garden plant for sure!

***Fritillaria meleagris*, The Checkered (Chequered) Lily or Snake's Head Fritillary**



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In the words of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, “*And now for something completely different*” is this eye-opener Fritillary. Usually, members of a particular plant or animal family have a similar basic appearance. This fritillary is clearly very different in its floral appearance from the species described above. Mother Nature must have been “lost in

thought” when composing the genetic composition of this highly unusual — and highly cherished — spring-blooming bulbous plant.

Popular since at least 1572, this 24-inch-or-less-tall, hardy (zones 4 and up) perennial has incredible purple-shaded, checkerboard-pattered, drooping, two-inch-long bell-shaped flowers. Whew, that was a lengthy description of the blossom. A pure white-petaled variant is sometimes encountered, but it is that rare purple checkerboard or clustered square pattern that steals the show.

This plant has a variety of nicknames, including the Snake’s Head Fritillary, Guinea-Hen Flower, and Frog Cup Flower. Why they have these names is anyone’s guess.

Other, more understandable nicknames passed down through the ages are Lazarus Bell or Lepper’s Lily, for the flowers resemble bells carried by people afflicted with leprosy as a ringing warning to avoid them — yes, that is an entertaining conversation starter — and Chess Flower or Chess Lily due to that similar checkerboard pattern. It depends on which game you prefer.

Native to Eurasia, this spring-blooming bulb (March through May in most locations) actually enjoys wet or constantly damp soils. It was first observed growing, actually thriving, in partially sunlit, grassy river flood plains or damp woodlands.

Over all these centuries, wild populations have been almost eradicated (now endangered) because of their unique flowers and relative ease of growing in less-than-ideal soil drainage found in most gardens worldwide. In fact, it thrives and multiplies, delighting most gardeners.

Bulbs are available in most bulb catalogs and on websites in the fall. Keep the soil moist (not soaking wet) as the plant grows in spring. By early summer, the plant will begin dormancy, but continue watering (moderately, though) your other plants.

# Gloriosa — Flame Lily

## *Gloriosa superba*



Less familiar names of this bizarre plant are Flame Lily, Tiger's Claw, Fire Lily, and a few others.

If you have never viewed the flowers of this strange plant, you need to grow it. This small vine is an eccentric member of the Lily family, native to East Africa and Asia. It thrives in tropical forests and grasslands, provided the climate is frost-free.

The vines will grow to about 5 feet tall and climb in a remarkable way. The shiny, green leaves have their tips drawn out into a small tendril that wraps around a twig or other thin but firm support. Scattered along the stems are large, lily-like, downward-facing flowers. The other

striking features include the stamens, which splay beneath the petals like wooden spokes of a wagon wheel, and the green style and stigma, which do not hang downward but jut out at a 90-degree angle. Such a weird construction of floral parts!

The variety called Rothschildiana has wavy, bright red and yellow petals. Named after Lionel Walter Rothschild, 2nd Baron Rothschild (1868 - 1937), he brought this vine to England from his zoological travels in tropical Africa. Lionel was a son of the wealthy Rothschild banking family of England. When not banking and serving as a member of Parliament, he would venture off (or hire explorers) to parts unknown to collect birds, insects, animals, and the occasional pretty plant for his personal, and later public, museum. It pays to have wealth!

This vine is hardy to zones 10 and 11 and is an annual everywhere else. It appreciates full to partial sunlight and well-drained, fertile soil. You can plant them in containers, and in the fall, allow the soil to dry. Overwinter the flowerpot in a cool location. Do not dig up or separate the tubers—they are brittle and may break if not handled carefully. Water the pots in early spring, and later, fresh shoots will regrow and bloom by midsummer.

Seeds are scarce, and seedlings need years to grow before flowering. Garden centers and nurseries don't sell them, but a few online nurseries offer tubers or potted plants. This vine is very poisonous, so keep it away from all mouths—human and pet.

# Gomphocarpus — Family Jewels Milkweed; Balloon Plant

*Gomphocarpus physocarpus*; *Asclepias  
physocarpa*



Alright, brace yourself (again) if you feel uncomfortable viewing (and reading) about plants and flowers having references to human sexual attributes. You may have safely bypassed my earlier tense and cringe-worthy sexual-like descriptions of *Dracunculus vulgaris*. If so, reading this plant's attributes should undoubtedly raise your eyebrows.

Hey, it's difficult to be gentlemanly and an unfazed, "relax, it's only words" reporter on garden plant characteristics. Oh well, let's bite the bullet and get on with the matter at hand.

Once considered a full-fledged member of the genus of *Asclepias*, botanists now consider this milkweed in a separate classification. They do this all the time with other plants, which can be very confusing. For now, both generic names are acceptable. What can be very unacceptable for some gardeners is this plant's provocative common names based on its... ahh... "dangling masculine appendage" appearance. Please see the photo above; I think you will get the idea.

The typical white Milkweed blossoms, when pollinated, eventually form these inflated, two- to three-inch-diameter, pale-green, translucent, balloon-like seed capsules. They also develop soft bristles that resemble coarse hair. This attribute also contributes to this plant having an additional naughty common name of — oh boy, you can probably envision my red-faced embarrassment right now — "hairy balls". Good lord, I never thought I would type those combinations of words in my non-fiction gardening ebooks. If I wrote fiction — well, in today's vernacular — anything goes. Why these balloon-things have those decorative bristles is anyone's guess. No, please don't bother to guess.

While most milkweed species are native to North America, this genus is native to South Africa. Because of this transcontinental heritage, botanists established a new genus for this and other African milkweeds. This one differs significantly from our common milkweed species, as it grows to over six feet tall with many side branches. If you wish a non-controversial nickname, you can call this plant the Tree Milkweed. Whew, that's a tame name compared to the others bantered about by giggly, grinning-faced gardeners.

As a plant native to South Africa, it is adaptable to dry, low-fertility soil. In our gardens, with prime, fertile, and regularly moist conditions, it thrives. The one unfortunate trait of this species is that it is hardy only in zones 9 and above. If you live in zone 8, it can squeak by with adequate mulching during a typical winter.

The only way to have new plants each summer in lower zones is to grow this plant from seed, which is easier than growing our common

milkweed species. This one does not need a winter chill period to induce germination. It is advisable to sow the seeds indoors (preferably under a heating mat) in late winter or early spring.

After the threat of frost, you can plant the seedlings in your flower bed. By all means, plant plenty, for like all other species of milkweed, it will attract Monarch butterflies by the droves. Being such a large, sprawling plant, it should produce enough leaves for several larvae to eat and grow to maturity.

# Helenium — Sneezeweed

## Helenium autumnale 'Mardi Gras'



Here is a gorgeous perennial that can cause sneezing, but only if you dry the flower heads and grind them into a fine powder. The western Native Americans and the westward-ho pioneers followed this process. The common name they gave was “snuff.”

For those of you who are not into stuffing narcotics into your nostrils, it is nothing like powdered cocaine. Historically, snuff was powdered tobacco, but a less-addictive generic plant was substituted when you can't have the real McCoy. Thus, this beautiful flowering plant was used. Your immediate impatient question is, “*What in blazes do these daisies have to do with all this snuff business?*” The answer is — nothing at all. I thought a little historical nonsense was in order.

Moving on to the primary content of this ebook, the original Sneezeweed flowers are bright yellow, single-petaled “daisies.” Over the years, plant breeders (not under the influence of creating better snuff) saw great potential in developing several colorful varieties for home gardens, for eye appeal only.

Helenium grows quickly from spring-sown seed and will develop into two to five-foot-tall, bushy plants by fall. Throughout this time, depending on the variety, you will encounter masses of brightly colored single to double “daisies,” attracting plenty of bees and butterflies of all sizes, colors, and species.

Make sure to grow your plants in plenty of sunshine and well-drained, fertile soil. They make excellent companion plants for many other garden flowers, especially those related to the Composite family.

Nurseries offer several varieties as potted plants or seeds. One outstandingly colorful variety is ‘**Mardi Gras**’ (shown above), with young flower heads that start yellow, age to orange, and then red. The central cone is dark brown (or black) with vibrant yellow stamens. No wonder the bees and butterflies go crazy over visiting these flowers! It, and most other colorful varieties, are hardy in zones 4-8.

# Helianthus — Sunflower

*Helianthus annuus; argophyllus*



Most commercially available sunflower seeds are of annual varieties. We are all familiar with the large flower heads of tall, massive plants nodding by the sides of vegetable or flower gardens. Over the past few years, interest in wildly colorful sunflowers has grown into a “cult following.” With advances in genetics, new, unusual varieties have emerged on the gardening scene.

You can purchase seeds from any seed catalog or garden center. For a tall variety — over 10 feet — grow the impressive **Mongolian Giant**. This plant will make a strong impression with its height and seed size. I held one seed that measured a fraction of an inch over one inch! The whole plant is fantastic!

Many other sunflower varieties will grow shorter yet still provide an admirable height. There has been an enormous leap in the creation of many earth-shade colors—from white, orange, red, and garnet-red to almost-black flower heads, such as the **Chianti Hybrid**.

There are even pollen-free varieties available, developed to serve the cut-flower market. The common bright yellow sunflowers shed considerable pollen onto shiny, Pledge®-covered tables. Messy, but these new pollen-less types prevent constant cleanup.

Just when you've seen it all, you haven't. Double-flowered varieties are available, with the entire head composed of petals, such as the gorgeous yellowish-orange **Honey Bear**.

Recent novel forms developed have an even more surprising construction. One type, called **Sun-Fill Purple Hybrid** (which needs a new snazzy name), shown above, has the flower head radically transformed. The prominent outer rings of leaflets or calyx are the dominant feature. They are purplish-green, while the usual circumference of "petals" is significantly reduced in size. The effect is startling to the point of being slightly repulsive but also delightfully intriguing.

One can only guess at the remarkable gene-bending developments awaiting us in future sunflower attractions.

# Hibiscus

## Hibiscus moscheutos



Every flowering plant family has a few flamboyant members that flaunt their flowers either in size, color, or length of bloom. This group of plants is no exception. Being part of the extensive Mallow family, they are tall-growing perennials or woody, tropical shrubs. For our purposes, we will focus on hardy perennials for flower gardens. Do not confuse the colored tropical and semi-tropical hibiscus shrubs (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) offered in many garden centers with the following (and other) perennials. Those tropical plants are sensitive to cold and should be stored indoors over the winter.

As usual, with all members of this family, each Hibiscus blossom will only last one day (like Daylily flowers), but you may not notice this, for

so many blossoms bloom each day. The petals unfurl in their full glory during the day, but by evening, they fold into a cone and later drop off. They can be 'messy' for the daily-spent blossoms drop onto the ground. Rake the soil weekly to keep the surrounding area clean.

I must relate a true story about one summer evening several years ago. One of my Aunts attended a swanky, champagne-sipping, outdoor garden party. She wore a brightly colored floral-print dress, but needed to add something else to catch everyone's eye. To add that extra WOW factor, or "bling," she secured two large, bright red hibiscus flowers behind her ears.

All was fine and dandy until that evening she noticed people were "... *looking at me strangely, pleasantly though, but with a strained smile or as if trying to hold back a fit of uncontrollable laughter.*" While chatting with society's upper crust, she noticed they were staring at her with enormous eyes, like those of a deer caught in a car's headlights, and had a frozen smile on their face.

On arrival home, she took off her earrings, looked into the mirror, and discovered the two hibiscus flowers had folded up and appeared to look like reddish-black horns sticking symmetrically out of her head.

*She took her embarrassment in stride and laughed as she told her story. "Oh well, some people think I am a 'she-devil.' At least I looked the part that evening!"*

The next day, after that unfortunate party experience, she was nervously awaiting the next edition of the newspaper, specifically the society page, describing the "who's who" of well-dressed guests, interesting gossip, and superb entertainment of the garden party.

Upon delivery of the newspaper, she took a deep breath, then plunged into the unknown, inky depths described by the guests to the reporter. To her surprise, there was no mention of her appearance in the article. She fell into a quagmire of relief mixed with the hostility of not being mentioned at all. She always ended her story by stating, "*What the hell was wrong with those people? I was more interesting than most of them!*"

If you have the garden space and need something to show off to your friends, the **Lord Baltimore** hibiscus, similar to a variety shown above, is a must-grow-now plant.

Created by hybridizing several related species in 1955, this hardy (zones 4 to 9) variety remains the best cultivar for any garden. It reaches 8 feet tall (possibly more) and 4 feet wide on well-established plants. For smaller, growing plants, I suggest placing them in large containers.

The dinner-plate-sized (up to 12 inches) bright, crimson-red flowers will cover this 'herbaceous shrub' all summer. Estimates of 300 large flowers may appear on a well-grown plant over the course of a typical summer. Someone sure had plenty of time to spare counting them!

It and similar varieties prefer full sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. With all those flowers and foliage, make sure to water this plant during extended dry spells.

Please note that the tall stems will die back to the ground by winter. Cut off and discard the dead stems, then apply mulch to protect the crown below ground. New growth will return during the late spring, ready to amaze you once again for another summer-filled extravaganza of fabulous flowers.

Hibiscus are forgiving plants, but try to select the best growing locations to highlight their outstanding beauty. Due to their height and spread, they are best planted at the back of a border, in the center of an island flower bed, or as a hedge. They are also not bedding plants, but rather accent or brag-about "look what I grew" plants.

With all these flowers, you may think there will be plenty of seeds produced by Fall. In some varieties, yes, but for this outstanding plant, the flowers are sterile and produce no seeds.

Since you are enthusiastic (as I am) to get this plant, where do we purchase it? Your local garden center may have it available, but it is offered only as potted plants (since it produces no seeds). If not, several well-known mail-order companies always have a supply on hand.

# Hymenocallis — Spider Lily or Peruvian Daffodil

*Hymenocallis festalis* or *Ismene festalis*



Spring would not be the same without lawns and gardens filled with crowds of golden daffodils dancing in the breeze. William Wordsworth saw (rough guess) ten thousand blossoms blooming near a lake and under trees. Viewing a clump of Narcissus in your border may not be poetic, but it is just as uplifting.

Daffodils last but for a few weeks, and then the show is over until next spring. What a bummer. But what can bloom during the summer that can mimic those blossoms?

Hymenocallis belongs to the impressive Amaryllis family, which includes the popular Christmas gift Amaryllis bulbs. No, they do not bloom as large, but have those long, blade-like leaves.

The cluster of blossoms on two to three-foot-tall stalks (technically called an inflorescence) has the familiar daffodil-like shape. The thin outer petals flare outward like spider legs, while the inner, delicate, membranous petals fuse to form a cup. Viewing these flowers for the first time, they look “almost like” daffodils but have a noticeable, exotic difference. One feature that makes these plants more enjoyable is their powerfully sweet perfume, released primarily in the evening and at night.

Although most Narcissus bulbs are hardy in cold climates, these South American bulbs are hardy only in zone 8 and above. Although all gardeners can plant the bulbs, only warmer winter locations can keep them in the ground. All cold-climate gardeners need to dig and store these large bulbs over winter. Like your Amaryllis gift plant, you can easily place the bulbs in large containers.

Flower color varies by species; most have white petals, such as *Ismene festalis* ‘**Zwanenburg**’ (shown above), but others sport eye-catching yellow blossoms, such as *Ismene* **Sulfur Queen** (shown below).



These plants (garden and container-grown) prefer partial sunlight and moist, well-drained soil. By late summer, allow the bulbs to endure drier soil to “harden them up” by late fall. Container plantings can remain in their pots but withhold water for most of the winter. This is critical because the bulbs will not bloom in summer without this dry rest period.

# Ipomoea — Japanese Morning-Glories

*Ipomoea nil*



Let's see...how am I going to explain all the different and obscure Morning-glories without writing several volumes of ebooks? The sheer size of varieties and species (over 500 worldwide) appears to be a favorite creation by flower designer Mother Nature.

Most species have a similar tubular or funnel-shaped floral structure. For any variation in color and size, there is a representative vine. One common feature is that they are all tropical plants. Yes, not one hardy floral soul in the entire group. As long as they experience a warm, moist spot to set down roots, they are happy to grow as annuals. If you are a plant and have a limited time to live, you'd better grow fast and bloom furiously to form seeds of as many future generations as possible.

I must point out that our common Morning-glories is a consortium of three species rolled into one. The older Latin names are *Ipomoea purpurea*, *Ipomoea hederacea*, and *Ipomoea nil*. The common Morning-glory has various leaf forms, but its colorful funnel-shaped flowers look similar.

These species have developed many varieties over the years, with colors limited to blue-purple, pastel reddish-pink, and white. Most flowers have a white center and a star-shaped pattern of whitish or darker markings on the petals.

Native to Mexico and Central America, our common morning-glory has had a rich history, but not as being colorful garden vines. The Aztec Indian culture of Mexico believed that chewing the seeds provided a way to communicate with their Sun Gods. Yes, it was their form of a “trippy” drug with psychedelic and “out of this world” visionary applications. So, the common Morning-glory held a special honor for their religious observances.

Somehow, and by some way possible, the Morning-glory became popular in China centuries before Marco Polo stopped by for a neighborly visit. How did that happen since the vine originated in Mexico and Central America? One theory is that the sweet potato (remember, it is *Ipomoea batatas*) was transported westward by seafaring settlers from Central and South America to other Pacific islands. Is it possible that the other Morning-glory species hitched a ride along with those sweet potatoes? Someone may have had an eye for beauty and taken seeds along.

Anyway, seeds eventually made their way to China, but the vine was not grown solely for the colorful flowers but, again, like the Aztecs, for the seeds. Instead of communicating with the gods, here the seeds had medicinal properties, including as a laxative. I see. They enjoyed them as a way to stay ‘regular.’ Okay, I will not venture further into this particular practice. Moving right along...

On some uneventful day in the 9th century, the seeds were introduced to the Japanese. Bless them, for they are credited as the first people to

cultivate it as an ornamental garden flower. No mind-bending, bowel cleansing seeds for them — only the joy of experiencing floral beauty! Since then, they have popularized Morning-glories (especially the *Ipomoea nil* species) worldwide by creating new, colorful, and unusual varieties.

So, if possible, make sure to view selections from Japan, offered by larger seed companies. They have several unusual and colorful varieties to amaze you and your gardening friends. For example, a rare variety called **Kikyo Rigel** (shown above) has fantastic blue-and-white petals that form a star-shaped pattern. Most morning glories do not display this unusual pattern.

The Nil species is called Japanese Morning-glories and is also known as Picotee Morning-glories for having a thin white rim around the flower's circumference. They are more orderly, forming shorter, less invasive vines. Some varieties have variegated felted leaves. Complex genetic factors, including the incorporation of genes from other morning-glory species, result in few fertile seeds. Morning-glory genetics is really a totally messed-up affair, creating wildly colorful blossoms.

This species makes it the showiest of all morning-glories and is highly valued as an ornamental plant (especially as a container plant) in Japan. Growing potted morning-glories of different colors and sizes has been popular in Japan for generations.

# Lilium — Lily

**Lilium candidum; Lilium orientalis**



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No garden is complete without the beauty, grace, and wonder of a Lily. There is a vast world of lily species and varieties rich in color and fragrance that you will love to have in your garden. I recommend planting the following types.

Let's begin with *Lilium candidum* '**The Madonna Lily**', shown above. This is not a lily associated with music-star '*I am a Material Girl*' Madonna, but of the Virgin Mary, religious fame. Historians consider this species the oldest cultivated ornamental plant, with historical and artistic references dating back 3,000 years. And no wonder, for this lily is so darn pretty!

According to legend, it became associated with the Virgin Mary. Many Medieval and Renaissance paintings depict Mary with these white flowers. The pure white sepals, golden anthers, and sweet perfume are symbolic of her pureness of body, heart, and soul. A similar-looking lily is *Lilium longiflorum* 'The Easter Lily'. Many people often confuse this gorgeous lily with the Madonna Lily. Christian churches have long associated this lily with Jesus's resurrection (also known as Easter). The problem is, *Lilium longiflorum* is native to Taiwan and other Japanese islands. I know Jesus never vacationed in those areas, since the Madonna Lily is native to the Middle East.

This Madonna Lily has different growing requirements and habits than other lilies. Flowering in spring, it goes dormant in summer but forms a rosette of foliage on the ground late in fall and over winter. All other lilies (and most other flowering plants) are the opposite. This one blooms before all others with several pure white trumpets and sweet perfume.

One of my most vivid memories is of my mother growing this lily in her garden. Even being a little boy, I could not understand why this plant had green leaves in the heart of winter, surviving under inches of snow and able to bloom by early May. This lily made no sense, which sparked my initial interest in botany.

This lily was once popular in cottage gardens but is now sadly forgotten by gardeners and nurseries. Most nurseries will not have bulbs of this lily, possibly because of its different growth cycle. Specialty nurseries are your best bet for getting bulbs. Please try to grow this unique and beautiful lily in your garden!



Another very hardy lily to find and grow is *Lilium orientalis*, the '**Stargazer Lily**', shown above. For garden lilies, this variety is the most recognizable — maybe not in name but in size, color, and fragrance of the flowers. It is also a favorite among florists. So why include it here if it is so popular? The answer is because it needs to be in your garden if it isn't there already.

Historically, this lily has been a significant genetic contributor to many other bulbs sold today. Predecessors of this lily (based on wild species heritage) had their large flowers hang downward. They were pretty, but they hid their real beauty unless you crawled underneath on your back to view them. That is a rather undignified (and dirty) position for any gardener to experience.

In 1974, California lily breeder Leslie Woodriff created an upward-facing lily which he aptly named 'Stargazer.' What a fantastic name for this stunning plant! From this lily, newer varieties appeared with other

colors, but all had that critical trait of having the large blossoms face outward (and upward) for easy viewing.

Nurseries sometimes overlook offering Stargazer (compared to all the other Lilies) to the public. It is like beloved, older Hollywood actors being replaced by newer, high-profile (and box office profitable) actors. I know I am getting old when I do not recognize more modern actors, but I still gravitate to the older (or deceased) stars on Turner Classic Movies.

# Lunaria — Honesty, Money Plant

*Lunaria annua*



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As a gardener, a specific plant must have captivated you, leading you to enjoy other exciting flowers later. 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 me (aka “conned”) that they were silver coins made by this plant. It eventually dawned on me that they were fooling me. I was always gullible.



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

This plant is a glamorous relative of cabbage, 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's flower beds, these two-foot-tall-plus plants are rarely grown, and seeds are not available at 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 sure to catch the eye.

# Lupinus — Lupin or Lupine

## Lupinus polyphyllus



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Is Lupin spelled with the letter “e” or not? It depends on where you live. In North America, it does, but for the rest of the world, it does not. I like Lupin better because many people pronounce it 'loo-pin'.

The Latin words lupin and lupus mean wolf or wolf-like behavior. People once considered the wild Lupin plant a botanical wolf. Wolves often stole sheep from shepherds, so wild Lupin were horrible weeds that took over land better suited to valuable crops. Today, like all members of the pea-bean family, farmers consider them helpful in improving soil fertility. Several problems occur when they reach overwhelming proportions.

Sometimes, invasive plants come not only from other continents but also directly from our gardens. Natural stands of these plants in the western areas of North America blanket extensive fields and encroach near roadsides, offering drivers a pleasant vista. The trouble (well, let's call it a "pleasant" problem) begins when people — especially gardeners — duplicate this visual experience without thinking of the potential consequences.

Wild Lupins have purple, white, and blue spikes of flowers. When the rainbow colors of the **Russell Lupin Strain** (*Lupinus polyphyllus*) became the rage among gardeners, people began to scatter seeds here and there to create a kaleidoscope of colors along roadsides and in nearby fields.

One report occurred in New Zealand, where tour bus drivers intentionally spread these seeds along their routes to create eye-catching amazement for their tourist passengers. Officials blame landowners who need plants to control land erosion caused by the roads. They chose Lupins for their ability to enrich the soil and for their pretty appearance. Whatever the reason, the plan worked too well, and they have spread everywhere.

A similar event occurred in the northern areas of New England, where the Russell Lupin Strain has become wild (again) due to its invasive behavior along roads and farm fields.

One unusual account of deliberate rampaging by Lupin occurred in Maine. According to reports, back in the early to mid-1900s, a lady named Hilda Edwards (later changing her name to Hilda Lupina – no kidding) deliberately threw Lupin seeds along roadsides. She did this while walking about town or throwing them out the windows of a friend's car on her travels through Maine and other nearby states. She seems to have been a modern-day Johnny Appleseed, but obsessed with Lupins instead of apples.

No one seems to mind all this blaze of colors, except wildlife officials, for Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire have spring Lupin festivals when the flowers are in full bloom. Other states, including those

bordering the Midwest, have also reported them growing near roads and fields. Officials have tried to teach people the folly of deliberately sowing the seeds in the wild. Most people ignored them or countered with vocal protests.

Botanists consider not all Lupin roadside plantings wrong. If we can use a native species as a planting, so much the better. We find an excellent example near several Texas highways, where the native (and state flower) Bluebonnet (*Lupinus texensis*) blooms in early spring.

# Lycoris — Naked Ladies

## Lycoris squamigera



It's not what you think. However, you can have some fun with your friends by saying, *"Come on over to see the naked ladies in my garden!"* This nickname is one of the several common names for this perennial bulb. The other names are Surprise Lily, Magic Lily, and Resurrection Lily. These nicknames stem from the fact that the flower stalks emerge from the ground in late summer, before the leaves develop. Yes, you read that right. This plant is one of those curious oddities Dr. Seuss would grow in his garden (with help from Thing 1 and Thing 2).

It may also surprise you to see them in bloom, as their stems blend into the background. Some gardening authorities (yes, just like the know-it-all ones from your garden club) suggest planting them with hostas. I

have the foggiest notion why. Perhaps they want them clothed in large leaves. I say plant them where you can enjoy their bare-naked-stem beauty!

The bulbs will bloom for three weeks or more. After that, they form seeds, then die back to the ground. Here today – gone tomorrow. About a week or two later, the leaves will emerge and grow. They stay this way over the fall and winter. By late spring, they die back, and the bulbs go dormant until mid to late summer. Then, the cycle begins again. These plants may have come from an alternate universe!

Believed to have originated in China, Korea, or Japan, they are hardy in zones 4 to 10 and thrive in full to partial sunlight and well-drained soil. It is important not to disturb these bulbs. Plant and forget them, except to fertilize and water during growth. Don't dig them up or transplant them!

Many people say the Amaryllis-like blossoms have a sweet fragrance, while others swear they smell like a natural gas leak. No matter; the beauty of those lovely pink flowers is their eye-catching appeal. Growing these bulbs is the only way for most guys to have naked ladies in their garden without having police intervention due to neighborhood complaints. Oh well, hope springs eternal!

So, let's give hearty applause to this currently underappreciated plant for providing our gardens with outstanding beauty throughout the summer and fall. Its floral performance is spectacular.

# 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 attractively, woodland gardens. Let’s face it — who can turn down growing beautiful blue flowers? This species has five gorgeous sky-blue petals, each highlighted with a yellow center. Some pink-and-white varieties are available, but blue shades are hands down the most popular.

They are hardy biennials (to zones 3 or 4) and prolific self-seeders, to the point that they may become invasive when conditions warrant, but

they 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 that the more sunlight a plant receives, the more water it 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's 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 medieval 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*



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

Native throughout North America, *Oenothera* is well-suited 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.

These plants produce many bright yellow, four-petal scented flowers on six-foot-tall-plus branching stalks from early to late summer. Each

blossom lasts one or two nights, but more follow each succeeding evening. Although not a contender in “best in show” of garden plants, a stalk of spent flowers loses its attractive appeal. Still, the individual blossoms are lovely.

Some *Oenothera* species bloom only during the day, while others bloom only in the evening and overnight. It is these night bloomers that have a sweet perfume, enjoyable for all of us night critters. Forget about watching television show reruns on summer evenings; the best show to watch is here in your garden. The star of “The Evening Primrose Show” belongs to **Tina James’s Magical Evening Primrose** (*Oenothera glazioviana*), shown above.

Years ago, garden writer Tina James popularized this very delightful plant. According to rumor, she hosted Evening Primrose parties to showcase 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 perfume of lemon, lily, and honeysuckle.

When I owned and operated my mail-order flower nursery, I received an email from a customer, “Gail in Arkansas,” who described an unusual experience with this plant. Here is what she wrote:

*“I ordered several things from you in the spring of 2001, one of them being the plant mentioned above. This past summer, it was the hit of my garden. Even non-gardeners would come and gather around the plant to watch its magical openings. I’m sure that many people who drove by were thinking we were performing some sort of black magic ritual gathered around this plant every evening at the same time. Blooming here in my NW Arkansas garden would begin at approximately 8:50 pm, and the show would last until around 9:10 pm. This summer, it was three feet high, and the highest flower count for one evening show was 67 blooms.”*

Each plant grows to four feet tall with hundreds of flowers over the summer, so plan a rowdy garden party each evening. Your neighbors

won't mind, will they? They may think you are crazy (hardcore gardeners usually are) for staring at these plants each evening, and they may call the police. You may be on the evening news! "*Police report strange goings-on in one neighborhood garden—film at 11.*" You may invite the police officers to the party if the excitement becomes too intense. Hey, the more the merrier!

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, but seeds may be available in wildflower catalogs.

Please note that this plant is a biennial — it grows the first year and blooms the next. It self-seeds, but sows its seeds each spring to establish flowering plants for next year's summer displays.

All these plants grow well in full sun to part shade and in fertile, well-drained soil. Most species are hardy from zones 4 to 9.

# Papaver — Breadseed and Opium Poppy

**Papaver somniferum; orientale**



The species' Latin name means 'to bring on sleep,' but the fantastic color of their flowers will keep you wide-eyed awake. Many single-to double-flowered varieties (some with blossoms up to 4-5 inches in diameter) are available in white, red, pink, purple, and striking bicolors.

Many poppies have simple single blossoms, but some varieties go a few steps further in modifying their petals. They feature contrasting colors and torn or shredded petals. It would be rare to find this in a natural setting (Mother Nature has more conservative tastes). Still, breeders love to see (and thus breed) plants having striking differences.

The photo above shows “**Drama Queen**,” and every part of the flower is eye-catching. Not only are the petals a glare of vivid scarlet and purple, but they are also black against bluish-white stamens. What can possibly top this stunning poppy? How about adding more petals?



Yes, let’s add more petals. One such double bicolor catches my eye. Called **Black Swan** (shown above), it has semi-double, frilly, red and purple petals. It looks like the flower bud exploded into a colorful confetti mess! If this poppy doesn’t make you stop and stare, I do not understand what other varieties can. Well, many varieties will, but I love this one! It’s impressive, but, as critics sometimes declare, “less is more.” As an artist, a neighbor of mine would say, “It’s way too cluttered.” Yes, this poppy is impressive, but my eyes prefer “Drama Queen” for its “complicated colors but simplistic construction.” I can be an art critic too.

All poppies prefer full to partial sunlight in well-drained, fertile soil and make excellent container flowers. These plants will self-seed and bloom from early to mid-summer. Unless you remove the developing seed capsules, numerous seedlings will emerge next spring. Don't fret about law enforcement stopping by for an unannounced visit. The commercially available flower garden varieties produce little, if any, significant amounts of latex to form opium. Many varieties are available only as seeds from larger seed companies.

# Passiflora — Passion Vine; Passion Flower or Maypop

*Passiflora incarnata*; *caerulea*



If you had to vote on the world's most unusually constructed flower, this would be number one. Most of these plants are tender, tropical vines, but a few, called Maypops, are hardy and can survive winter conditions. As the nickname suggests, they bloom in late spring.

These vines use coiled tendrils to grasp adjacent shrubs and other supporting structures, reaching heights of 8 to 12 feet and more.

The common name of 'Passion Vine' results from two opposed ideas. One notion is that eating its succulent egg-sized fruit gives you romantic tendencies. At the same time, the other, more acceptable idea

concerns the crucifixion of Jesus Christ: a crucifixion and an aphrodisiac all in the same flower description. Go figure!

Many South Americans call it the legendary “Flower of the Five Wounds.” According to historical accounts, sometime around 1609, Spanish missionaries wrote about a beautiful flower growing in the South American rainforests that symbolized Christ’s Passion before and during his crucifixion.

We have to have a vivid imagination of what the flower parts represent:

- Ten sepals and petals of the flower represent the ten apostles who witnessed the crucifixion of Christ.
- The corona, or a ring of wavy filaments, represents the crown of thorns.
- The five stamens are symbolic of the five wounds, while the three stigmas represent the three-headed nails.
- For extra dramatic flair, the palmate leaves and the many wavy tendrils represent the hands and whips of His Roman persecutors.
- Like Jesus, the flowers remain alive (well, in full open bloom) for only a day.

With hundreds of species, hybrids, and varieties available to the home gardener, the flowers’ sizes and colors are limitless. While most species are native to subtropical and tropical regions of North and South America, all can be grown in colder zones when raised in containers.

If you need a hardy variety, try *Passiflora caerulea*, commonly called the **Blue Passion Vine** (shown above). Four-inch diameter flowers with beautiful white petals ringed with blue to purple filaments appear all summer. They also have a lovely, sweet perfume.

This species is also among the most commonly available in many nurseries. Its twining vines can grow to well over 15 feet if uncontrolled. By the fall (in warmer locations), egg-sized, deep orange

fruits become ripe, then you can pick and squeeze them to produce 'Passion-fruit' juice.

Evergreen in tropical climates, this species is deciduous (drops its leaves) in cold winters. Its hardiness is from zones 6 to 10. Northern gardeners in zone 5 can winter over this species only with excellent protection against severe cold. Lower-zone gardeners will need to grow this vine in containers and overwinter it in a basement or a heated garage.

All Passion Vines make excellent container subjects. If you have a bright window, it can bloom indoors during the winter.

# Pelargonium — Geranium

## *Pelargonium hybrida*



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Our popular garden variety, Pelargonium — called geraniums — has either solid green leaves or variegated, zonal leaves with contrasting bronze bands. They are bushy, with semi-succulent stems, topped with pink, violet, white, salmon-orange, and the traditional favorite, red or scarlet flowers.

Beginning in the late 1700s, with the increased production of glass windows set in wooden-framed structures (early greenhouses), vast numbers of tender, flowering plants, including cuttings of new and rare geraniums, were grown during the winter months. Wood and coal-fired

furnaces provided the heat to keep them alive until they were allowed to be planted outdoors in late spring.

So, what makes them such an entertaining floral subject? Rather than being grown by celebrities, these plants eventually became popular with the general public. The poor who lived in cities had no land for planting flowers and could enjoy at least one potted plant near a door or windowsill. A potted blooming geranium added color to a drab, gray cityscape and lifted the mood of depressed housewives.

This plant may mark the first time people began “cherishing” potted plants to help ease tension and depression. These “pet geraniums” made people (lonely women especially) feel needed and act like companions. That makes more sense than having “pet rocks,” a popular fad that began in 1975 — and thankfully ended not long afterward.

Geraniums are prime potted plant subjects because they tolerate dry, low-fertility soil and have their roots confined within a clay flowerpot. These soil conditions mirror those found in their native regions of southern Africa. Friends would give other friends and family members rooted or unrooted stem cuttings or side-growing shoots.

Artists often painted potted red geraniums against the backdrop of the dismal homes of common laborers, along with the obligatory sleepy house cat near the pot. Authors such as Jane Austen would include a depressed character shyly retreating from society to enjoy the company of a potted red geranium. Charles Dickens firmly believed in growing them to give the poor and oppressed a reason to smile.

Not all of society loved these plants. Initially, the wealthy gentry grew them for their estate beds and borders. As the plants became popular and were excessively planted, their opinions changed. They then considered the plants “vulgarly common” because they were overly commercialized. If poor people grew them, that was a significant reason not to have them. Pompous author and playwright Oscar Wilde comically worried that he would become reincarnated as a red geranium instead of a precious orchid after his death. I wonder how he fared?

Today, geraniums of all colors (yes, especially red) display themselves in beds, borders, pots, gravesites, and window boxes. Most are seed-raised varieties, and gardeners now treat them as annuals, for they all die by the early onset of winter. What was once a cherished plant is now considered disposable. That is a rather sad treatment of a once-dependable, obedient botanical pet.

# Petunia

## **Petunia hybrida; Petunia x atkinsiana**



There are more than 20 species of Petunia in South America. That may not sound like a lot, but this genus took the world by storm when it was first discovered. The storm still rages. Visit your nearest garden center to see the latest results from the hybrid varieties offered. There must be hundreds (well, millions, to be on the safe side) of Petunia varieties available for gardeners. They continue to enchant and tease us to grow them in our gardens.

Today's hybrid plants offer better growth and disease resistance than the non-hybrid types provided years ago. The icing on the cake is that all these petunia varieties provide excellent viewing in any bed, border, or container, and some will cascade from hanging baskets.

It was once thought impossible, but new hybrids now flaunt most rainbow colors. There are shades of ‘almost green’, ‘almost black’, ‘almost yellow’, (yellow is a troublesome color), spotted-dotted colors (via a wild-and-crazy genetic disorder called “jumping genes”—sounds like fun), and other mixed-up psychedelic colors. These new varieties have eye-popping petals pigmented with contrasting white or colorful spots, splotches, and stripes.

One color has been more elusive—that being ‘almost blue’. Older and some newer varieties gravitate toward gorgeous purple shades. Still, recent genetic developments have created an accurate-to-adequate ‘that’s really blue!’ depending on your perspective.

One recent breeding breakthrough is **Evening Scentsation F1** (*Petunia x atkinsiana*), shown above, an inter-species hybrid of at least two species, *P. axillaris* (which is a large white and night-scented petunia) and *P. integrifolia* (a pinkish-violet-flowered petunia) It is a rightful 2017 AAS Flower Winner that startled judges with its powerful 24-hour sweet fragrance, and I can’t believe my eyes’ true blue color. One judge reportedly proclaimed it as “*One of the best blue petunias I have seen, a nice mounding and spreading habit. Excellent fragrance, too!*” Need I add further accolades?



Then, there is a radical “far beyond blue” variety called **Night Sky**. Mother Nature goes entirely “modern art” with this petunia. It is a floral representation of Vincent Van Gogh’s masterpiece, *Starry Night Over the Rhône*. The petals are dark blue to brilliant purple (blackish in partial shady areas) and heavily splashed with bright white dots. It is shocking yet beautiful, as each flower displays different white spots.

If supplies last, you can purchase these two varieties from most garden centers or nurseries, as they are very popular.

All petunias need as much sunlight as possible and fertile, well-drained soil to grow and bloom well. Yes, they require regular watering and light fertilizing, but spend some time with these flowers and care for them. They will reward you with endearing acclaim, admiration (and envy) from your friends, family, and competitive neighbors.

# Platycodon — Balloon Flower; Chinese Bellflower

*Platycodon grandiflorus*



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From its bud development to full bloom, the popular perennial Platycodon will pique your curiosity. Its unique growth pattern is like an indelible question mark, constantly prompting you to wonder, “*What in the world is THAT?*”

Platycodon is closely related to the previously reviewed Campanula flowers. In some respects, it resembles Campanulas when in full bloom, but not so when in the developing bud stage. When all five petals remain fused, it inflates slowly, like a balloon.

For some observers, the bud resembles a Chinese lantern or a round Christmas tree ornament. As the development proceeds, it grows rounder until “POP,” the petals suddenly burst open, displaying a large star-shaped Campanula-like flower. People give it the other common Chinese or Japanese Bellflower name for obscure reasons. Bells do not display a flared star-shaped appearance—maybe an exploded bell—so it makes no sense to me, possibly for you, too.

The flowers are a stunning bright lavender-blue, almost purple in some eyes, when blooming in a shady location. But the beauty doesn’t stop there. Other varieties exist, with pretty pink or white petals. The blooming season, from late spring through several weeks of summer, is a time of vibrant beauty. Botanists recommend periodically removing spent blossoms to prolong this beauty and prevent excessive re-seeding.

This plant is super hardy in zones 4 to 9, can grow to almost 2 feet tall, and develops a mound shape as it matures. It enjoys plenty of sunlight and well-drained soil for the best growth and blooms. You can plant it in most areas, such as borders, rock gardens, and containers for deck or patio enjoyment. Once planted in a garden location, try not to transplant it later. Doing so drastically disrupts the root structure and may never recover from the shock, eventually leading to death.

You can usually find small potted plants at larger garden centers or nurseries, in person or online. There are a few named varieties, but one to specifically look for is **Sentimental Blue**. It grows slightly less tall but provides plenty of those “almost” true-blue, puffy balloon balls most of the summer.

A terrific seed-grown type, **Pop Star™ Blue**, can bloom the first year when sown in early spring. It, too, showcases stunning deep-blue “balloons and star-shaped” blossoms all summer on more compact growing plants.

# Polianthes — Tuberose

## *Polianthes tuberosa*



This delightfully fragrant plant is native to Mexico and is grown from a bulb or thickened tuber. From midsummer until a frost, a spike of medium-sized, single to double, waxy, rosebud-like flowers opens in the warm evening air. They release one of nature's most potent, syrupy-sweet perfumes — like that of gardenia, hyacinth, lily, and jasmine combined.

A long time ago, funeral directors would intermix floral displays with these flowers. The reason was to help mask the odor of..you know..a “ripened” dear departed. Well, it eventually lost its popularity. You don't want someone to mention your garden smells like a funeral home. Ultimately (and with better body preservation techniques, such as

refrigeration), this plant regained acceptance for inclusion in garden displays.

There are occasional reports of overplanting this bulb and the humorous results of creating a “toxic” atmosphere in the garden's vicinity. One little-known fact is that King Louis XIV of France had hundreds (possibly thousands?) of tuberose plants planted in the Grand Trianon's flower beds at Versailles. Each evening and through the night, their combined fragrance was so overpowering that it made people physically ill. Many people learned to flee the area before sunset. Imagine the chaotic scene of the exodus from the area.

According to a letter written by Madame de Maintenon, on August 8, 1689, she states: “*We have to leave the Trianon each evening on account of the tuberoses; men and women alike find themselves overwhelmed by the power of their aromas.*” Well, if you want to “get even” with your horrible neighbor, here is one unique way of doing so!

This plant thrives in a sunny location with well-drained, fertile soil and makes an excellent container subject. This is especially important for northern growers who want to encourage the bulbs to bloom earlier. Tuberose is sensitive to cold; it prefers warm conditions. They are garden-hardy only in zones 8 to 10.

Two forms are available: single- or double-petaled flowers. Both types have beautiful perfume, but the single-flowered variety blooms earlier. If raised in a container, allow the soil to dry over winter. By spring, resume watering (with a top dressing of fertile potting soil) and keep the pot in a warm, well-lit area. Wait until all frost threats are past before placing the container outside near where you will spend your summer evenings.

# Quamoclit — Spanish Flag Vine

## Quamoclit lobata



It's not every day that we encounter a plant with the Latin name beginning with the letter Q. That in itself is noteworthy for being included in a list of entertaining garden plants. Anyway, botanists also call this plant *Mina lobata* or *Ipomoea lobata*, and it is an annual

climbing vine related to the common morning glory. It has several spikes of two-inch-long, tubular flowers. They change colors as they grow and age, from bright red buds to orange, then to yellow, and finally to white. This vine is easy to train on a fence, trellis, or left to sprawl in a hanging basket.

Let's face facts – morning glories are boring for many non-gardening adults, unfortunately. Yes, the flowers are beautiful, but they bloom only in the morning. This plant, however, flowers all day, has a different flower shape, and attracts the neighborhood hummingbirds. Now the real fun begins.

I grew several morning glories one summer, and the hummingbirds overlooked them but competed with one another to sip nectar from them. Watching them was comical. Have you ever seen hummingbirds fight? Now that's avian gladiatorial entertainment! Grow this vine to see it happen.

The seeds can be difficult to germinate; they need to be "chipped" or nicked with a sharp knife to have faster germination. This surgery will allow water to enter the seed faster. For heaven's sake, take your time doing it. You don't want to slice off your fingers! That's not a type of entertainment you need to experience. Another, but safer, practice is to soak the seeds in warm water for a day, then sow them in individual pots. Start these plants (and Morning glories) about a month before planting outside in the early summer to get a head start on earlier blooming.

You can find seeds in many seed catalogs and garden centers, but they may not be available as young potted plants.

# Rhodochiton — Purple Bell Vine

## *Rhodochiton atrosanguineus*



I am always amazed at the unusual—well, let's be honest and say strange-looking tropical flowers. This vine is no exception. For a moment, I was worried my eyes had suddenly developed astigmatism.

The two-inch-long blossoms have a Salvador Dalí-like appearance; they resemble bells but are elongated and distorted. I know, confusing, but use your imagination. The deep pink to reddish-purple sepals display a “peeled back” bell shape, but with an elongated petal clapper. These petals are dark purple or nearly black and flare outward (like a knob) to expose the stamens and pistils.

Native to Mexico, this vine was first recorded in 1836, and explorers were struck by its dangling blossoms. Although hardy to zone 10, this vine grows well from seed and blooms over the summer. The heart-shaped leaves and thread-like tendrils coil around any structure.

A height of 10 feet or more is not uncommon when grown in partly sunny locations. The plants will grow well in containers but will not reach a large height. The blossoms will also look great when planted in a hanging basket.

As with all vines, fertile, well-drained soil is necessary for maximum flowering. Frost will kill this plant, so raise it as an annual. If grown in a container, keep the vine indoors and care for it during winter. It may not bloom, but expect massive re-growth and abundant flowers the following summer.

# Rosa — Roses

## *Rosa hybrida and varieties*



Unlike their older counterparts, which bloom for a few weeks in late spring or early summer, modern roses can delight us all summer. Some shrub roses are accurately advertised as being the most floriferous, longest-blooming, and exceptionally hardy.

They all offer improved disease and insect resistance, attractive color options, and continuous blooming. They show great potential to endure periodic neglect, particularly in drought conditions.

Roses bred today attract immediate attention for garden planting. Two hybrid tea varieties, out of practically hundreds (thousands?) available

to choose from, “caught my eye” while touring garden centers and public gardens.

My first recommended must-grow rose is a delightful, moderately fragrant variety called **Ketchup and Mustard™** (shown above). The underside of this double-petaled rose is bright yellow, while the top is fire-engine red. I know other roses display similar bi-colors, but this one really stands out.

The second hybrid tea rose that screams “look at me!” is **Ink Spots** (shown below).



This is one of the “almost black” roses available (as of this writing). The color is deep, velvety garnet red, revealed when the petals spiral open, but the buds appear black. As for fragrance, not much, but we’ll overlook this discrepancy since we cannot take our eyes off those Gothic-like petals.

Suppose Hybrid Tea roses are “not your cup of tea” for steeping in your garden. In that case, I recommend growing the bushier shrub roses. Unlike older antique roses, which may be too large for smaller suburban gardens, newer shrub roses are more manageable.

Most shrub roses are outstandingly beautiful, healthy, and long-blooming. I saw several of them in a public garden and became awed by their beauty. Most are hardy from zone 5 (possibly 4) and up. Over the past few years, new ever-bearing landscape roses (such as the stunning **David Austin English Shrub Roses**) have great potential for all-summer blooming cut-flowers.

You can find the more unusual varieties via online searches of rose growers. Larger garden centers usually avoid the “wild ‘n woolly” varieties.

All roses appreciate a sunny, well-drained, fertile soil location in beds or borders. Adding mulch will help provide additional fertility, water retention, and root protection over the winter.

# Salpiglossis — Painted Tongue

## *Salpiglossis sinuata*



What do you get when you cross a daylily and a petunia with a Fabergé Easter egg and a Tiffany lamp? The answer is something that has undergone massive depreciation in value. But if you guess this outstanding flower, you are also correct. This out-of-the-ordinary annual garden plant provides masses of petunia-like, flamboyant, outlandish, and exceptionally colorful flowers. This is what happens when a petunia goes stark raving mad — with color.

Introduced from regions of the southern Chilean Andes in 1824, this magnificent plant took the gardening world first by surprise, then by disbelief, and finally by wide-eyed wonder. It still amazes non-

gardeners who first encounter its stunning beauty. You may have deduced by now that I love this flower — and you are correct.

Some varieties may be solid color, while others feature contrasting colors, geometric patterns, or golden veins. Some named types (the best ones) are wickedly gorgeous, appearing like stained-glass windows etched or overlaid with shining gold.

One complaint I have about *Salpiglossis* (not of its making) is the horrible nickname it's been given. Painted Tongue sounds like a medical complication. I keep thinking of a doctor telling a patient to say “ahh” while examining the inside of the patient's mouth. *“Oh, my goodness! You have a serious case of Painted Tongue,”* says the doctor. *“You will need to flush your mouth each hour with mouthwash.”* No, this lovely plant needs a great (and healthy) common name such as ‘stained glass flower’ or ‘kaleidoscope blossom.’ You can name it better than I.

These plants grow to over two feet tall in full sun to partial shade (especially in hot regions). Given their mountainous heritage, they prefer cooler conditions for growth. Warm temperatures and high humidity will limit their full blooming potential for most of the summer. If planted in a bed, border, or container, make sure the plants grow in fertile, well-drained soil.

Like petunias, if the plants get too tall and ‘gnarly,’ trim them back, and they will re-bloom in two weeks.

In all my years of gardening, I have never found this plant for sale at garden centers. More emphasis is placed on petunias because they are better known.

Seeds are available in many seed catalogs, but I recommend avoiding the “mixed-seed” option; the flower color from mixes can be disappointing. Always buy named varieties such as **Kew Blue**, with vivid dark blue to black petals; **Red Bicolor**; or **Royale Purple Bicolor** (shown above), all with outstanding, colorful petals.

# Salvia — Fuzzy Bolivian Hummingbird Sage

*Salvia oxyphora*



The Salvias (or Sages) are always the go-to plants for any take-notice flower garden, whether in beds and borders or in containers on decks or patios. Not only will you enjoy their small tubular flowers, but so will plenty of hummingbirds if you live in areas where they are found.

Most salvias broadcast vivid shades of red, blue, purple, and pink. Some are excessively pink, such as *Salvia oxyphora*, commonly nicknamed the Fuzzy Bolivian Hummingbird Sage. It has the most intense, neon-pink, fuchsia-pink, puffed-up, or inflated tubular blossoms.

If this wasn't enough to catch your eye, those flowers are fuzzy, or fluffy, like a little girl's winter mittens or coat. The fuzziness is caused by excessive tiny extensions called trichomes on the epidermis of each flower. They help prevent excessive moisture loss (especially in dry climates) and serve as barriers that deter insects and herbivores (such as deer) from eating the flowers.

Each blossom looks comical like a fluffy, puffy, large-lipped, pink stuffed "critter" of your choosing. This plant will certainly be the subject of plenty of talk among your family, friends, and neighbors who visit your garden.

This salvia, like most other similar species, enjoys plenty of sun and fertile, well-drained soil. In its native range in the foothills of the Andes Mountains in Bolivia and Peru, it can reach over 3 feet tall and slightly less wide, but in a garden setting, it is much smaller, especially when grown in containers. No matter, for it blooms constantly from late spring until a fall frost. The thickened, deep-green leaves provide the perfect backdrop for those spikes of gorgeous blossoms.

This delightful salvia is hardy only in zones 8 and above; gardeners in lower zones will need to treat this plant as an annual, or, best yet, grow it in a container that can be brought indoors as a houseplant during the winter. After the last spring frost, you can place it outdoors again, where it will grow larger and become loaded with those intense pink blossoms all summer.

# Saponaria — Bouncing Bet, Soapwort

## *Saponaria officinalis*



This European wildflower has a muddled history, dating back to Medieval times or even earlier. It is a beautiful perennial in the Dianthus (carnation) family and a terrific bloomer from mid to late summer until a killing frost. Clustered together, the single or double flowers are rosy pink or snow white. They have an incredible Concord grape perfume.

Another fascinating feature is that the leaves form soapy suds when you crush and rub them in water. The Latin name of 'Saponaria' means 'relating to soap' or 'soap making.' Museums did (and some still do) use leaves to produce soap suds for washing delicate or irreplaceable

fabrics. If you need a quick hand-wash, pluck a few leaves, crush them, add a little water, and presto — instant hand soap.

The plants grow to over 2 feet tall, thriving in part sun to full shade and in fertile, well-drained, moist soil. They are exceptionally hardy in zones 3 to 9.

Saponaria retains its wildflower heritage, is invasive but not overly aggressive, and can be controlled with a downward thrust of a sharp spade. Yes, that sounds horrible, but sometimes we have to practice 'tough love' on some overactive plants. It tolerates dry soil conditions and has few, if any, insect or disease problems. No wonder, for the bugs don't want soap in their little mouths!

A recommended rare variety (which is the species only dressed up) has double-petaled white flowers. It cannot form seeds; the only way to propagate it is by cuttings. The magnified grape fragrance is due to the extra set of petals.

# Silene — Night Flowering Catchfly

## *Silene noctiflora*



This English wildflower (a relative of the Dianthus or Carnation family) has become naturalized in many regions worldwide and is considered a weed. Well, this weed has particular interests, such as releasing a sweet perfume into the night air, and a sinister agenda — vitally important if you happen to be a small insect.

The name of Catchfly refers to the adhesive properties of the stems and leaves. The small hairs on them, botanically called trichomes, secrete a sticky, glue-like substance that traps insects such as aphids, whiteflies, and other small insects, leading to their deaths. These sticky hairs prevent these bugs from eating the plant, so let's not fret too much over

the fate of these small critters. Sinister plants have a right to protect themselves.

To make matters even more strange, Catchfly has, in some locations, a smile-inducing nickname of “clammy cockle” or (even more ghastly) “sticky cockle”. Don’t get me started on those names! I can’t stop laughing. Imagine a 1960’s Hollywood sci-fi movie with the preview proclaiming, *“You were terrified of ‘The Day of the Triffids’ — now become petrified of ‘NIGHT OF THE CLAMMY COCKLES. These plants will suck the life out of you!’”* A tiny print disclaimer would then read *“...actually, of small insects.”*

Although classified as an annual, it can be a perennial in warmer areas. The small flowers are pure white and release a powerful yet sweet perfume into the evening and nighttime air for most of the summer. Clip off spent flower stalks to encourage more blooms and prevent excess seed production. They grow over two feet tall but become bushy.

My photo above does not do its beauty justice. I took it in the morning when all the petals were drooping. Well, we don’t look our best in the morning after a wild night of killing little bugs, do we?

Seeds are difficult to come by since this is considered a weed in many locations, but be on the lookout for them for curiosity’s sake.

# Silphium — Compass Plant or Rosinweed

## *Silphium laciniatum*



Who needs roadmaps and GPS when you can grow this unusual plant? This impressive perennial is native to the vast prairie land of North America. The coarse-textured, six- to nine-foot-tall stems and bright yellow, daisy-like flowers resemble sunflowers but are not directly related to them.

The common name refers to how they orient their lowermost leaves. They position themselves vertically along a north-south axis. By observing their arrangement, the pioneers could obtain approximate navigational bearings.

Why on earth does it do this? Botanists theorize that it orients its leaves to avoid constant exposure to the harsh afternoon sunlight of the prairie. Aligning to a north-south orientation reduces water loss from the leaves by exposing less surface area to direct sunlight.

Another common name for rosinweed is the Plains Indians' practice of splitting the stalks and extracting their sticky sap (called resin). When the resin began to dry, they would start chewing it like bubble gum.

This plant is hardy in zones 3 to 8 and prefers full sunlight. You do not need to worry about regular watering, as it tolerates drier soil. Make sure the soil is well-drained; consistently wet soil will kill the root system. If growing in ideal conditions, it can (possibly) live longer than you — hopefully for a very long time!

Blooming occurs in summer, and each plant can produce large numbers of flowers. Place these giant plants in the rear of your border so as not to shade or overtake your other flowers.

On a sad note, this plant once grew in abundance with the tall prairie grasses before the plow appeared. Today, conservationists try desperately to protect some wild prairie areas.

The great American conservationist, environmentalist, and author Aldo Leopold wrote in his book *A Sand County Almanac* about the loss of prairie flora and fauna. One passage describes him finding a solitary Compass Plant growing in an old, tall grass-covered cemetery. For him, it was ironic that one of the last few remaining wild-stock plants grew in such small protected areas, even there in a neglected cemetery. He wrote, in part:

*“What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked.”*

You will not find this plant offered for sale in any garden center. You may discover plants in wildflower nurseries or in wildflower seed catalogs. Let's hope we can obtain and grow this fantastic plant in our flower gardens.

# **Spilanthes — Toothache Plant; Peek-a-Boo Plant; Eyeball Plant**

**Spilanthes oleracea**



In case you must wait a month to visit your dentist due to a toothache, this annual plant may ease your pain. Within the category of “will wonders never cease?” comes this highly unusual flowering plant. Yes, it can help temporarily relieve a toothache or sore gums.

I am a bona fide skeptic. Before I nibbled its leaves and flower heads, my first impression was that its Novocain-like power of pain relief was nonsense. Well, I was eventually proved wrong in the most frightening way. I almost became a recipient of the Darwin Award.

Just nibbling on a small leaf produced a “tingling” sensation, followed soon after by a slight numbness of my lips and tongue. What, I wondered, would happen if I were to chew a few more leaves along with some flowers? I found out — almost having a panic attack for being so reckless — my mouth became totally numb. I could not talk well and worried my throat would swell and prevent me from breathing. Yes, thoughts like that can help prevent a panic attack. **Not!**

I considered calling 9-1-1 to explain my situation, but decided it could be problematic. Try talking after a few Novocain injections. Dentists always hold back a belly-laugh when that happens.

Later, I would add this lesson to my life list: “Never do stupid things like this ever again.” I rate this item below my “never pluck giant icicles off rain gutters” lesson. I have a scar above my top lip from that youthful encounter with a shiny-object syndrome addiction to glittering winter icicle stalactites.

Anyway, *Spilanthes* is native to the vast Amazonian region of Brazil. Its naked yellow flower-head usually develops a reddish top. This appearance suggests, to many observers, a freaky alien eyeball (assuming they have them).

Blooming throughout the summer months, this plant grows slightly over a foot tall, though it can reach up to 2 feet tall. Other than those bug-eyed flowers, the plant nonchalantly blends with the other plants in your border.

This tropical plant is more than just a curiosity in your garden. How anyone discovered its mouth-numbing properties is questionable. The active chemical within the plant is spilanthol, which interferes with mammalian nervous system pathways, causing numbness.

Researchers use the leaves and flowers for other medical purposes, such as potential treatments for malaria and urinary problems, as well as for antiseptic solutions. Further research and experimentation continue, but this plant’s pharmacological potential looks promising.

One word of advice: don't experiment with it if you have any aches or pains.

Spilanthes prefers to grow in sunny to partly sunny locations and in well-drained, fertile, moist soil. It makes an excellent container planting for a deck or patio. You can also place it on a sunny windowsill for the winter.

You cannot find seeds or potted plants in your garden center. Most gardeners are not familiar with this plant, but you are now. You can purchase seeds from larger online merchants who specialize in rare plants.

# Tigridia — Tiger Flower; Shell Flower

## *Tigridia pavonia*



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When you see these flowers, you must restrain yourself from loudly shouting, “*They’re grrreat!!*” Sorry, Tony (and Kellogg’s), for stealing your trademarked approval statement.

Grown from small corms, Tigrida blooms all summer sporadically with 3 to 6-inch diameter, flared, cup-shaped flowers. The petals are fused to form this cup-like shape. The base colors of the petals are shades of yellow, red, pink, orange, and white. The cup’s interior is heavily spotted (even striped like a tiger) with a contrasting color, usually bright red. They are absolutely gorgeous!

These flowers are attached to stiff, 2-foot stems above gladiolus or iris-like, sword-shaped leaves. The only “disappointing” remark about these flowers is that they last only one day. However, more flowers eventually bloom, extending your viewing pleasure for several weeks during the summer.

Hardy to zones 7 and above, we colder-climate gardeners need to plant these corms in late spring. Insert them four inches deep in well-drained, fertile soil and in a sunny location. They can also be grown in containers to better appreciate those beautiful flowers.

By fall, before or after the first light frost, carefully dig up the small corms (with the leaves still attached to them for better recognition). Transfer them to a container to dry in a cool location. Label these corms for replanting in the spring for immediate recognition.

# Tricyrtis — Toad Lily

*Tricyrtis hirta*; *T. formosana*



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Throughout this ebook (and my other flower gardening ebooks – yes, a shameless plug), I always write about plants and flowers I have either grown or viewed in nurseries and public gardens. This plant is different—I've never heard of it. With so many garden centers in my area, I never came across it. Out of curiosity, I looked into it, and to my surprise, several online mail-order nurseries sell varieties of this plant. Customer comments from these nurseries' websites rave about the beauty of these perennials.

Many gardeners may also be unfamiliar with this hardy, shade-loving perennial. One reason is that it blooms in late summer and into the fall.

Garden centers and nurseries, large and small, struggle to sell fall-flowering plants for spring sales.

Another reason is that this plant's name may discourage people from planting it. Toad Lilies? Toad! You can forgive the name if you look at the flowers — they are gorgeous!

There are over 20 known species of this plant, but they can interbreed to produce numerous hybrid varieties, all with wild-and-crazy colorful flowers. The one- to two-inch, star-shaped blossoms have a base color, such as white, yellow, or pale blue (again, this depends on the variety), with many contrasting colorful spots. Protruding from the center of each blossom are the pistil and anthers, and they too have spots.

Toad Lilies are hardy in zones 4 (or 5) to 8 and originate in eastern Asia, including China, Japan, and the Philippines. According to an unsubstantiated report, the toad nickname began with the Philippine Tasaday Indians smearing *Tricyrtis* flower juice on their hands before setting out to collect frogs for...a dinner entrée, a frog-jumping contest, something fun to do on a lazy Saturday afternoon — I don't know. They collected frogs – period. That “report” did not go into further detail. Heavens, inquiring minds need to know!

Well, the word "toad," not "frog," eventually came to be associated with this plant. The more rational (and simple) explanation for the toad-name is that the spotted-dotted flowers may resemble the skin-bumps on a toad. The things people imagine when naming plants are delightfully mindboggling.

Let's get back to the real facts about this plant. It thrives in partial to full shade and in moist, well-drained, fertile soil, but will suffer if the soil dries for extended periods. The plants can grow from one to three feet tall and become bushy. In its native lands, it grows along woodland edges or near streambanks.

Try to avoid exposing it to the intense afternoon sun, for it will limit flower production. Gardeners experienced with raising these plants

recommend growing them in containers to get up close and personal to enjoy the beauty of the individual flowers.

There are several varieties of this perennial, and I cannot list and describe them all. Two of the most “commonly offered” species and varieties belong to *Tricyrtis hirta* and *Tricyrtis formosana*. Breeders have crossed these two species with each other and with other species to create unusual hybrid varieties.

# Tropaeolum — Canary Creeper Vine

## *Tropaeolum peregrinum*



There was a time, long ago, when dogs were named canaries. Well, that sentence got your attention. Just wait — you'll learn more about this strange occurrence.

Many flower names are tributes to famous botanists (well, celebrated at the time), but this unusual climbing vine is different. Instead of who, it is what and where. The flowers resemble the outstretched, bright yellow wings of a canary. And where do canary birds live? No, not in the pet store, but the Canary Islands. Whoa! Hold on now. This vine is native to Peru and Ecuador. Discovered growing near Lima, Peru, in the early 1700s, explorers shipped seeds back to France, had a “layover” in

the Canary Islands, and when they arrived and grew in France, the vines took on the Canary name. Someone goofed — big time.

An even bigger mistake occurred with the islands' official names. The Romans named these islands Islas Canarias or “Islands of the Dogs.” The English word canary is from the Latin canarius, from the root canis (or canid), meaning “dog.” (Getting a headache from my obscure language history lesson?) Sailors reported seeing large dogs by the shore. There may have been large dogs living on the islands brought there by past invaders or explorers. Still, the most likely explanation is the mistaken identity of large seals as being dogs by not-so-bright nearsighted sailors.

Native to the islands were small, yellow songbirds, taken as exotic pets to Europe in the 16th century. They became known as Canaries. And the rest is history. Wow, that was a historical workout! When you learn about floral histories, expect the unexpected — especially from reading my ebooks!

Our common garden nasturtiums are related to this vine. Like them, the seeds, flowers, and leaves are edible and have a peppery, tangy flavor. Unlike the nasturtiums, the blue-green leaves and blossoms differ. With all the flowers mentioned in this ebook, this one is safe to eat. It's not every day you can proclaim to dinner guests that you made the salad with lettuce and “flowers and leaves from my beautiful and exotic Canary Bird Vine.” Just be prepared to see their expressions of confusion, horror, or nervous smiles (like, my host has lost her freaking mind, so I will try to act calm).

This vine is only hardy to zones 9 and higher, so, for most gardeners, it is an annual. Like most annual plants, they quickly grow and bloom from seeds. To experience plenty of beautiful flocks of blossoms over the summer, plant it in full sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. Allow the vines to climb a trellis, post, or fence. If grown in the garden, the vine can reach 12 feet, but in containers it is shorter. A hanging basket will also perfectly display these vivid yellow flowers.

# Tulipa — Tulip

*Tulipa sylvestris; turkestanica and other species and varieties*



We should recognize an essential group of garden plants. They are our fall planting and spring-blooming bulbs. These bulbs bloom when growing conditions are optimal, typically in spring or fall, when soil moisture is sufficient.

Many spring-blooming bulbous plants, like tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, and lilies, along with others, gradually suspend absorbing sunlight to “fatten” their bulbs and begin to go dormant by early summer. Nestled deep in the dry earth, these bulbs undergo dormancy and wait until a

new growth and bloom cycle starts again in the new year. They can wait out the summer arid times unfazed.

Among these bulbs, tulips stand out for their adaptability to different soil conditions. They thrive in soil with a more open texture, such as sand and gravel. Unlike many other plants, tulips prefer drier than moist conditions during dormancy, making them a perfect fit for neglected, sandy, gravelly, or desolately parched soil.

Tulips originated in the summer blistering hot (and winter's extremely cold), arid, sandy/gravelly Middle Eastern regions. If transplanted to Mars, I am sure they would also thrive there.

Meanwhile, here on Earth, the south-facing border of my house is not ideal for many plantings. It is subjected to constant summer sun, and the soil is, embarrassingly, almost like a gravelly sponge. It was not originally like this, but I failed to nourish it with compost over time. I planted red and yellow **Darwin Tulips** there (shown above) and in a few well-tended, fertile beds. The bulbs in these fertile, well-tended beds eventually died; fewer blooms occurred each year until nothing sprouted one spring. However, the bulbs in this derelict border have shown remarkable resilience. Larger clusters of these tulips bloom each spring and, by early summer, begin dormancy.

Tulips not only survive but also thrive in neglected, dry soil. If you have such a neglected, sandy, gravelly, or desolately parched plot of earth, plant plenty of wild or hybrid tulips this fall. By spring, you will be amazed at the transformation of lifelessness to abundant, colorful petals. Don't fuss with them. Leave them be. They will appreciate your neglect and reward you with years of springtime enjoyment.

So, what amazing, highly unusual, and ultra-colorful varieties worthy of being included in this ebook are there for you to purchase and plant this fall? Many is the answer, but for simplicity's sake, look for two but different types that are sure to be stared at by one and all.

First, there is the classification of varieties called **Parrot Tulips**. They are the most extravagant, flamboyant, and downright gaudiest tulips

you can grow. But, oh my, they are so incredibly beautiful! One variety is shown below.



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My second type of must-grow tulip varieties are the ones with color-variegated flowers. These are the contrasting striped and splattered petaled types. These tulips are infected with a virus (no cause for alarm) that causes genetic “malfunctions” in color production. For example, many tulips have yellow petals, but the "mutated" variants include red stripes and splotches. Some people may be turned off by such patterns, but let me share a true historical account of what happens when many people go crazy buying and growing these tulips.

The following paragraphs are from an ebook of mine entitled “***Oddly Historical Garden Flowers.***” I know, a shameless plug and promotion. So be it.

— Forget about gold, silver, stocks, bonds, and lottery tickets. To “get rich quick,” you need to invest in weird-looking tulips — especially the virus-infected bulbs.

I should be more specific about timing. Don’t do this investing now, but if you could travel back in time with Mr. Peabody’s Wayback Machine (or the TARDIS in *Doctor Who*, if you want a guaranteed dangerous adventure) to Holland and the surrounding areas from 1634 to 1637, you could make a tidy sum of cash.

Tulips originated in the Middle East and became a must-have item. Poets and artists praised their beauty. *QVC* or *HGTV* would hawk them to their viewers if television were around then. The most valuable tulips had streaks or spots in a different color from the base color. Buyers and sellers referred to them as “broken tulips.” No one knew about viruses or plant diseases — only their beauty, and if they could make you a quick profit by selling them.

In Western Europe, especially in the Netherlands, this fascination with weird tulips became a status symbol of addiction. It was so severe that tulip bulbs became “living currency.” Wealthy people purchased off-color tulips to impress their friends. Those friends had to impress their friends and so on. Eventually, this craze reached its peak during a period known as Tulipmania or Tulipomania, depending on the historical source spelling.

This obsession with what would otherwise be a beautiful garden flower became something akin to the California Gold Rush, but people caught tulip fever instead of gold fever. Wealthy people wanted to grow, invest, sell, buy, cheat, and steal rare tulip bulbs.



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One unusual variety, with white petals overlaid with bright red stripes, named **Semper Augustus**, similar to the modern variety shown above, was the most sought-after because it was spectacularly beautiful and extremely rare. One bulb was worth more than its weight in gold. Some people sold their houses to afford one or two of its bulbs!

Then the market collapsed. Fortunes were eventually lost when level-headed people asked, "*ARE WE CRAZY? Wake up, people!*" Some economists believe the collapse in tulip trading occurred when too many people joined the buy-sell frenzy and did not know what they were getting into. There were not enough "broken bulbs" to invest in, and the market quickly collapsed.

Other economists disagree, arguing that tulipomania was an overblown myth rather than an economic catastrophe for Dutch society. Some people did "lose their shirts," but most (the smart ones) did not venture

into the chaos. To each his own, but all economists agree this tulip time was pretty crazy. Other financial “commodity bubbles” and collapses have occurred since this period. Still, this mania is a lesson in the importance of careful investing in a new commodity.

The lesson here with tulips is to buy bulbs, plant them in the fall, and enjoy their beauty in the spring. You’ll be richer in enjoyment rather than in your bank account.

Tulipmania had ended, and they downgraded tulips to just being pretty spring-blooming flowers. Some enterprising people in Holland knew they were still a good thing and continued to grow and sell them, even to this day. Thank goodness we don’t have to mortgage the house to buy them.

Today, selling tulips and other spring-blooming bulbs (as fall-purchased bulbs and florist bouquets) is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Who knew such a beautiful flower could cause such excitement? —

Why not purchase these variegated varieties and the parrot types described earlier for your own Tulipomania event in your flower beds or borders? Just don’t go overboard in draining your savings and checking accounts!

## Vigna — Corkscrew Vine

*Vigna caracalla*



Dominicus Vigna (1581-1647), an Italian scientist and botanist, received the honor of having this vine named after him. If you ever have a plant named for you, let's hope it is as memorable as this lovely plant.

Related to the familiar Lima Bean (Fava or Broad Bean) grown in the vegetable garden, this vine produces large clusters of Sweet Pea-like flowers. They are white and purplish-blue, but age to a creamy yellow and twist into a corkscrew- or snail-shell-shaped appearance. But the huge deal is their strong spring Hyacinth fragrance.

It thrives in full to part sun (for maximum flower production), good soil, and moderate watering. It needs to be trained on a stable support, such as a sturdy trellis or fence, so the vine can reach 15 feet by fall. This butterbean graduated with an advanced degree in aeronautics. Don't worry, for plenty of flowers will be at eye and nose level. You can also try to raise this vine in a large hanging basket to let the flowers cascade downward.

You can enjoy them from mid-summer and well into fall before a hard frost kills the top growth.

Native to the jungles of Central and South America, this vine is hardy in zones 9 to 10. For most gardens, it is an annual in cold climates. You can dig up the swollen tuberous taproot by carefully lifting the root from the ground. Then wash and store it in damp peat moss or potting soil in a cool but frost-protected area over the winter. In the late spring, after the threat of frost has passed, you can replant this root.

Some seed companies sell the seeds, but you need to purchase them early, for they always sell out. I have never seen plants offered by nurseries.

# Conclusion

As usual, when I arrive at the conclusion sections of my ebooks, I fear that I have neglected or overlooked plants that, in hindsight, should have been included. This ebook is no exception. My apologies if I overlooked something blatantly obvious.

Case in point, via any internet search for unusual garden plants, you will encounter several orchids that display really weird or outrageously humorous flowers. Some have blossoms that resemble monkey faces...or naked men. Pretty weird stuff!

If you or someone in your acquaintance has that unique knack (alas, which I lack) of successfully raising orchids, these species and varieties are sure to be a treasure.

I have not included these orchids and other tropical plants, as they are well outside the scope of this ebook. Still, there must be many different annuals and perennials that have delightfully amusing or strangely attractive flowers. If you encounter other plants not listed in this ebook, please, by all means, plant them in your garden, and enjoy weeks of vibrantly colorful, outrageously constructed petals, or surprising fragrances.

# **Thank you for reading this ebook**

I hope this publication has encouraged you to consider growing the delightfully unusual annual and perennial plants above in your flower garden or in containers. Your garden display should always be a source of pride, showcasing the need for pleasant surprises not only in colorful petals but also in added humor, unusual histories, and delightful aromas.

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 experience and learning led him to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Botany.

He successfully owned and operated a fragrant flower mail-order nursery for twenty years. Unlike most mail-order nurseries publishing 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 style of writing (thankfully with fewer words) through 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.