

Growing ornamentals from seed (1)

Sowing outdoors

Growing flowers from seed has a number of benefits; it is inexpensive, rewarding and opens up your choices as it would be impossible for a garden centre to stock such a wide variety of plants as there are seeds on offer. Some plants are relatively easy to grow from seed and require no special equipment as you can sow them directly outdoors. These are called **HARDY** plants and include a) Hardy Annuals, b) Hardy Biennials and c) Hardy Perennials.

Hardy Annuals

These are the easiest of all to grow from seed, giving quick results and providing flowers for the first season only. They may be sown directly into the soil, normally in Spring (March-April). Some mature very quickly and may be sown as late as May. Spring sown hardy annuals will flower in the summer of the same year. It is also possible to sow many hardy annual seeds in autumn to give an early (spring) display the following year. Examples of hardy annuals are: annual Alyssum, Calendula, Candytuft, Clarkia, annual Chrysanthemums, Cornflower, Godetia, Larkspur, annual Lavatera, Nasturtium, Nigella, Night Scented Stock, annual Poppies, Scabious, Sunflower, Sweet Pea, Virginian Stock. Hardy annuals that are particularly **easy to grow** include Candytuft, Calendula, Cornflower, Godetia, Night-Scented Stock, annual Scabious and Virginian Stock. These are ideal for children, as are seeds from the Seeds Squad range (easy to grow ornamentals and vegetable seeds from Suttons) **Scented** plants include Sweet pea and Night Scented Stock. **New/unusual** varieties of hardy annuals include Nasturtium variabilis 'Fireworks Mixed,' (easy to grow, compact, striking flower colour, T & M) Sweet pea grandiflorus 'Elegant Ladies' (pastel coloured, good fragrance, T & M), Scabious 'New Summer Berries' (striking flower colours, easy to grow, Suttons), Sweet Pea 'Supremo Mixed' (long-stemmed, strong colours, good fragrance, Suttons), Cosmos Sonata dwarf mixed (good range of colours, easy to grow), Linum 'Charmer' (unusual mix of colours, Suttons), Calendula 'Lemon Zest' (easy to grow, long flowering period).

Hardy Perennials

These plants are excellent value for money, being very versatile and providing colour year after year, although most will 'die back' in the winter months. The variety of colour, size and form is enormous. Hardy perennials are generally sown one year and will produce flowers the following year, although there are varieties that will produce flowers in their first year, which is a bonus (see below*) Although they take a bit more patience, the great advantage is the choice that one can get growing from seed, rather than buying herbaceous perennials as plants. Examples of hardy perennials include the following: Aquilegia, Aubrieta, Delphinium, Dianthus, Foxglove, Hollyhock, Verbascum. Examples of those that will **flower in their first year*** include: Geum 'Oranges & Lemons' (Suttons), Dianthus deltoides 'Arctic Fire', Scabiosa 'Beaujoulais Bonnets', Penstemon Scrophulariaceae Beard tongue and Centaurea Asteraceae (all T&M). **Scented** hardy perennials include: many Dianthus varieties, Aquilegia 'Chocolate Soldier' (T & M) and Siberian Wallflower. **New/unusual** varieties include: Alstromeria 'Pink Paradise' (lovely range of colours, Suttons), Delphinium hybrida 'Green Twist' (unusual colour, T & M) and Foxglove 'Candy Mountain' (first upward facing foxglove, T & M). There are many striking and unusual hardy perennials – it is definitely worth the effort to grow some.

*NB Whilst hardy perennials may be sown in much the same way as hardy biennials (see below), they may also be sown under cover from January to March or May to June, especially if earlier flowering is desired. For further details refer to our factsheet 'Ornamentals – sowing under cover'

Hardy Biennials

Seeds of hardy biennials are sown in spring or summer and the young plants are moved to their flowering positions in autumn or early spring to flower about 12 months after sowing. plants treated this way include Canterbury Bells, Bellis perennis and Forget-me-not. Scented hardy biennials include Brompton Stocks, Sweet William and most Wallflowers.

General sowing guidelines

Before sowing any seed ensure that soil and climate conditions are right – not too cold or wet. Ideal conditions are when the soil is moist underneath and dry on the surface. Prepare the soil for sowing by removing weeds and any large stones and break the soil down to a fine tilth by forking over and raking. Sow according to directions. Rake soil over the seeds and then lightly tamp down with the flat end of the rake. Water the seeds/seedlings in dry weather and thin out as outlined on the seed pack.

Further useful information and literature may be obtained from seed suppliers such as Suttons Seeds (tel 01803 696400) or Thompson & Morgan (01473 688821)