

All In for Alliums

The heat is stifling and it is still only June (I do have to write these a bit in advance). You know the story – too hot, too humid, too early! It does not bring great joy to one's gardening practice. More than ever I want plants that just take care of themselves, ask nothing of a sweaty me and don't cause me to hate nature entirely (read deer, mugwort and Japanese beetles). I have already slid into a mid-summer languor searching magazines and catalogs for miraculous solutions to these problems. Alas, nothing miraculous BUT I have used my time in front of the fan to expand my knowledge of a plant that now is the apple – or in this case onion – of my eye: *Alliums*.

The *Allium* genus has hundreds of species including the culinary yummys like garlic, chives, onions, leeks and shallots. Makes sense that the genus name is Latin for garlic. Most species of *Allium* are native to the northern continents with a few from South America. *Allium* species have either bulbs or rhizomes and produce green leaves and blossom-topped scapes (flower stalks). The flower head is actually a cluster of individual florets making them a feast for pollinators. The clusters can be round, oval or cascading, and the flower color may be white, yellow, pink, purple or blue. Heights also vary, with stalks ranging from 5 inches to 4 feet tall. They grow best in full sun, though several varieties can also thrive in partial sunlight (*A. cowanii*, *A. oreophilum* and *A. bulgaricum*). The bulbs are hardy in zones 3-8 and, like most bulbs, need well-drained soil.

Alliums that grow from bulbs are planted in the fall but herbaceous alliums like '*Millenium*' have fibrous roots and can be planted at any time during the growing season. Bulb size determines planting depth. Large bulbs should be planted 5 to 6" deep, small bulbs are only planted 3" deep. In general, squirrels, chipmunks and voles don't like the onion taste of allium bulbs and leave them alone.

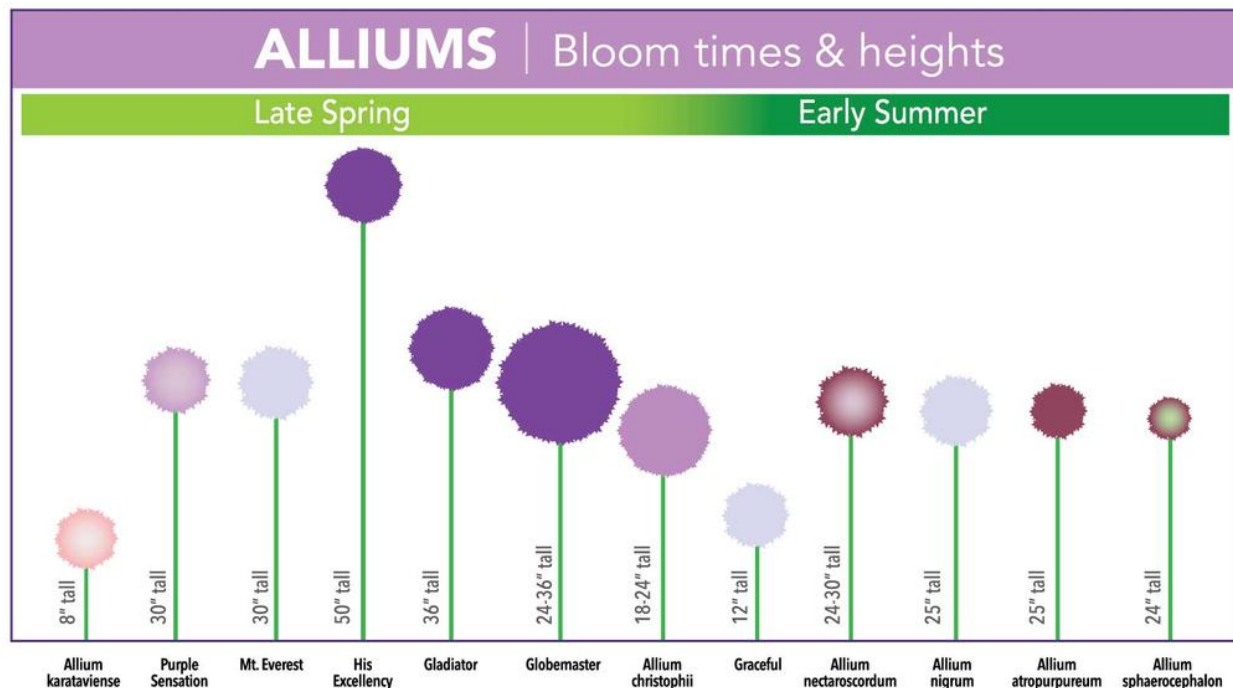
Alliums usually produce leaves a month or more before they send up a flower bud. With some species, the foliage starts to yellow and die back before the flowers have finished blooming. Alliums that grow from bulbs need their foliage to produce energy for next year's flowers so no obsessive tidiness please. Allow the foliage to die back naturally – if it can be removed with a gentle tug, it is done.



Allium 'Millenium'

Now the debate on whether to leave the flower heads... The seed heads are very ornamental but remember the plant will invest resources in developing those seeds. It is best to cut them early and save for flower arrangements. Big-headed alliums such as 'Globemaster' and *A. schubertii* rarely produce viable seeds but if the conditions are right, 'Purple Sensation', drumstick alliums and others will (some a little too much!). I rarely have a problem with this because alliums make such excellent, long lasting cut flowers, I raid the garden for them.

Really the only challenging aspect of growing alliums is picking which to plant. Most alliums bloom in late spring and early summer but by planting several different types, you can stretch the show for months. So what the heck, plant them all!



My favorite is *A. aflatunense* 'Purple Sensation' because they are inexpensive and I can plant *lots* (100 for \$44). Plus they bloom early, multiply over time and are easy to interplant among other perennials. The raspberry-purple flower heads are 3 – 4 inches in diameter on 24 – 30 inch stems.

If you are into drama, there are the big-headed alliums like 'Gladiator', 'Globemaster', 'His Excellency' and now 'Universe'. With blossoms measuring 5 -10 inches across on 3 - 4 foot stems, they will impress everyone but be sure to balance them with taller perennials so they don't look like they just landed on this planet.

For those of you with a more sedate nature, there are the white alliums. 'Mount Everest' with 5 inch flowers on 4 foot stems is particularly nice against a dark background. A tad more demure - think of her as a backup singer - is *A. nigrum* with a 4 inch vase-shaped flower that blooms a bit later. A fancier *A. nigrum* is 'Silver Spring' or 'Pink Jewel' which have a touch of pink.



'Purple Sensation'



A. nigrum and *A. atropurpureum*

Ok, sedate doesn't do it? How about Star of Persia (*A. christophii*) or Tumbleweed Onion (*A. schubertii*)? And then, an allium I just met this year, *A. siculum* var. *bulgaricum* - better known as Sicilian Honey Garlic. It is a head turner with large, nodding umbels of whitish flowers with a pink/purple flush and a green base. My oh-so pithy comment on meeting her was 'Wow!'



A. schubertii



Sicilian Honey Garlic

Or you can covet other colors like the two-toned purple drumstick allium, *A. sphaerocephalon*, or the deep maroon of *A. atropurpureum*. And then there is blue, yes, really blue like *A. caeruleum*, *A. caesium* and *A. azureum*. How about yellow? *Allium moly* has very un-onion like vibrant yellow flowers and blooms in May/June. Heads up – Moly is known as a self-sower.



A. sphaerocephalon



A. caeruleum

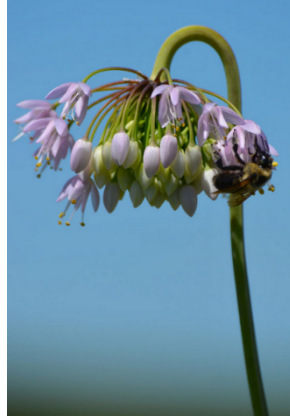


A. moly

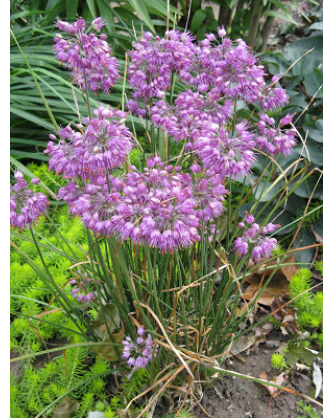
Less dramatic but equally appealing are the herbaceous alliums. They have 1 – 2 inch flowers that emerge from dense clumps of foliage that stay green and attractive all season. 'Millenium' is just outstanding in my book with purple, 2-inch flowers that bloom in midsummer and last for weeks. Two very similar summer-blooming alliums are 'Sugar Melt', with light pink flowers and *A. tanguticum* 'Summer Beauty' with lavender-pink flowers. Then there is *A. tuberosum* aka garlic chives. It is a late summer bloomer with pure white flowers on stiff, 20-inch stems. Nice garlicky taste, great for the kitchen but reseeds like crazy - I fight mine *all* the time.

There are many more but I will close with these little gems. Our native nodding onion, *A. cernuum*, is a tough little allium that will grow in a variety of conditions. Great for dry areas and meadows, it is drought resistant and charming. Ozawa onion, *A. thunbergii* 'Ozawa', stands out as the last allium to bloom, often in early October, providing nectar for the pollinators foraging in late fall.

There are any number of sources for alliums online but two in Connecticut worth seeking out are Colorblends and John Scheepers (the catalog has *four* pages of alliums). I wish you a halcyon summer and don't forget to stop and smell the onions.



A. cernuum



'Ozawa'