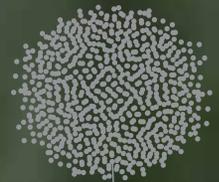


All About Alliums

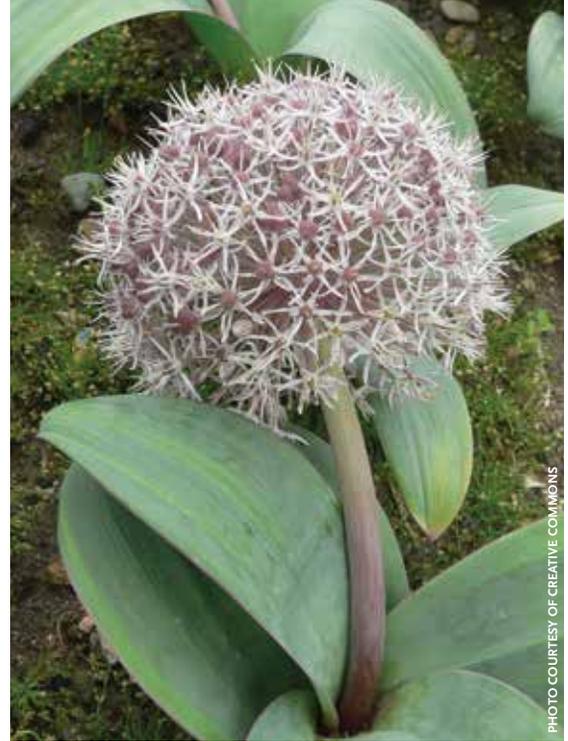
They are almost no
maintenance and
so much fun.

By Laura Schwarz





Alliums add bloom color and spiky texture to a flower border.



Allium karataviense 'Karata'

In a wobbly and dented metal pot in my yard lives a chive plant that somehow reliably proliferates, year after year, despite my best efforts to ignore it. I rarely water it, and I don't give it any winter protection. It receives inconsistent light, and I have no idea when it was last fertilized. Yet throughout the growing season, my neglect is rewarded with bountiful harvests of delicious chives for scrambled eggs and salads. There's no denying it: *Allium schoenoprasum* is one scrappy plant.

I rarely use the words "no maintenance" to describe any facet of gardening, but certain plant genera make me reconsider. *Allium* (also known as ornamental or flowering onion) fits my criteria: it doesn't need additional watering, it flowers reliably without any fussing or primping on my part, and it valiantly battles against the toughest bullying weeds. Anecdotally, I've never seen any insects or diseases bugging alliums in the landscape, and the deer and rabbits don't seem to like them, either.

Despite their tough-gal personae, alliums are sweetly beautiful, with bright, showy flowers that range from delicate and airy to starry and dramatic. The most familiar ornamental alliums are probably those with large, purple, globe-shaped flower clusters that sprout from fall-planted bulbs. These beauties and their rhizomatous relatives, when planted together, provide northern perennial gardens with blooms from the first *Allium giganteum* in late spring to the last *A. tuberosum* in late fall.

Alliums Among Us

Common edible alliums include onions, shallots, garlic, leeks and scallions. Aside from these species, I'm intimately acquainted with about seven ornamental species of alliums. However, there are more than 850 known species of *Allium* around the world. Though I consider myself a rather educated and well-read gardener, I had no idea of the enormity of this plant genus.

Members of the *Allium* genus can differ greatly in appearance and form. Blooms range from yellow to blue to the well-recognized pinks and purples. Some alliums are bulbous, while others are rhizomatous; some remain leafy and green throughout the growing season, while others go dormant after blooming. But overall, the species have many shared characteristics and growth requirements.

Allium leaves are often grasslike, though they can also be cylindrical (like chives) or flat, wide, and straplike. The leaves produce a chemical compound that accounts for their characteristic oniony taste and smell. *Allium* flowers grow on leafless stalks and bloom in an "umbel" inflorescence, which is a flower cluster made up of stalks stemming from a common center to form a flat or curved surface. (Think dill or Queen Anne's lace.) *Allium* umbels are rounded, often resembling globes. Each individual flower is tubular, terminating with six symmetrical pointed petals that lend it a starry look. Both rhizomatous and bulbous alliums can spread by seed.

In their native habitats, allium plants

grow in temperate climates like ours, though there are a few tropical exceptions. Most species (especially the ones we grow here) prefer dry, well-drained soil and full sun, though some varieties are native to swamps and forests, making them more tolerant of moisture and shade. The varieties discussed in this article are healthiest when grown in dry, sunny locations. Wet conditions will create opportunities for fungal diseases to thrive and damage the plants.

Under the proper growing conditions, *Allium* species will be among the toughest, most reliable plants in your perennial gardens. They rarely have pest problems, they have excellent drought tolerance, and they attract lots of friendly pollinators. Their blooms are bold and cheery, and their leaves can add unique textures throughout the growing season.

Favorite Bulbs

Here in Minnesota, we can plant bulbous alliums in the early fall, just like we do tulips and daffodils. One of my new favorite bulbs is *Allium karataviense*, also known as the Turkistan onion. Unlike many allium bulb varieties, *Allium karataviense* is grown for both flowers and foliage. Its large, flat leaves emerge in horizontal gray-green pairs, sometimes flaunting red margins and purple mottling. In late spring or early summer (May/June), pale pink flowers form compact globe-shaped umbels at the end of strong, short stems. The entire plant is stocky and small, reaching 12 inches at maturity.

All About Alliums

MARY LAHR SCHIER



Commonly called German garlic, *Allium senescens* spp. *glaucum* is not used in cooking.



Drumstick allium (*Allium sphaerocephalon*)



Common chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) are pretty but spread.

The Turkistan onion is technically a USDA Zone 5 plant, but I've seen it thrive in Minnesota, too. It does particularly well at the front of an informal bed, where the plant can self-seed at will, adding an element of unpredictability to each spring season. This species also performs well in containers. Its excellent chunky texture contrasts with more delicate annuals.

Another show-stopping bulb is *Allium schubertii*, which also blooms in late spring. A few sources call this species the "tumbleweed onion," which aptly describes the huge spherical umbels it produces. Its inflorescences can be up to 12 inches in diameter! All of the flower stalks are differing lengths, with some flowers opening very close to the stem and others opening up to 6 inches away. The overall effect is a bit like a bright purple Fourth-of-July sparkler.

Allium schubertii flowers are ideal as cut flowers or in dried arrangements. As with other bulbous alliums, each bulb produces only one flower, so planting this species in groups is the best way to show it off. After a few years, you can lift each allium and divide the bulbs to spread them around your garden, which helps optimize flowering, too.

Showy Blooms and Persistent Leaves

Rhizomatous alliums have different life cycles than their bulbous relatives. My chives, for example, have persistent foliage after they finish flowering, like many familiar herbaceous perennials. (My only complaint about growing chives is that they spread everywhere, which is why we keep ours in a container out of the ground.)

Allium senescens subsp. *montanum* 'Summer Beauty' is a sterile allium that won't spread by seed. Instead, it stays neat and tidy, slowly widening into a larger clump over time. Its 3-inch lavender flower heads are tightly globular, bobbing sweetly above bright green foliage that bends gently as it grows upward. This species blooms in mid to late summer, and like most alliums, the dried inflorescences add beauty to fall and winter landscapes.

'Summer Beauty' pairs well with other late-summer bloomers, especially those that also attract bees and butterflies, such as *Echinacea*, *Nepeta*, and *Agastache*. When it's not blooming, its flat glossy foliage is a bold year-round complement

More Alliums to Plant

- **'Blue Eddy' allium**
(*A. senescens* 'Blue Eddy'),
rhizome, USDA Zone 4,
8-12 inches tall
- **'Millennium' allium**
(*A.* 'Millennium'), rhizome, zone 5,
15 inches tall
- **Drumstick allium**
(*A. sphaerocephalon*), bulb, zone 4,
12-18 inches tall
- **'Purple Sensation' allium**
(*A. afatanense* 'Purple Sensation'),
bulb, zone 3, 36 inches tall

—Eds.

to the finer textures of grasses, especially light, airy ones like *Sporobolus* and *Panicum*.

Another great *Allium senescens* is the subspecies *glaucum*, commonly known as German garlic (though it isn't used for culinary purposes). As an ornamental plant, its miniature size makes it perfect for rock gardens or mass plantings at the front of a dry, sunny garden border. German garlic is 6 inches in height, and it spreads rather slowly. Its light pink, late-summer flowers are also quite small, with the entire umbel reaching only about 1 inch in diameter. Deadheading the finished flowers before they develop their seeds will help strengthen blooms the following year.

As implied by the Latin name "glaucum," this allium variety has flat, bluish-gray leaves that grow upward with an unusual twisting habit. Interplanting German garlic with low-growing *Sedum* varieties would make a fun edge for a stone path or a rock wall. It thrives on boulevards and in other difficult sites, too.

Plant Them All

The chives in my yard will spend another long winter in their container, and I'm thrilled that they'll return for another season of flavoring our meals. But admittedly, I'm much more excited about the reappearance of my other alliums, the ornamental ones, because they're beautiful, well behaved, and nearly maintenance free. I'll definitely be planting more varieties this spring, and I already know that I'll love them. 

Laura Schwarz is a horticulturist and writer in Minneapolis.

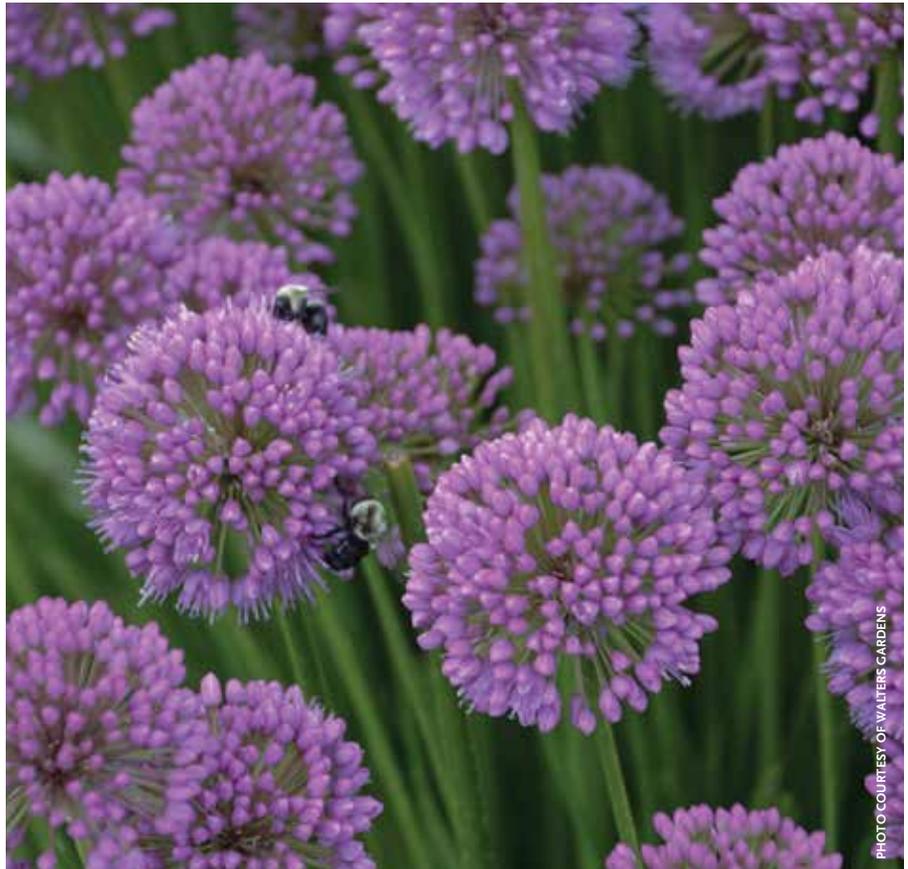


PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTERS GARDENS

'Millennium' allium, like most alliums, is a bee magnet.



MARY LAHR SCHIER

Allium 'Ivory Queen' is a standout in the garden.