OLD SCHOOL GARDENING: THE 8 MOST RELIABLE FLOWERS AND VEGETABLES TO GROW FROM SEED

Nothing beats the satisfaction of starting with a few packets of seeds. To boost your odds, we asked horticulture pros which varieties germinate most gloriously.

THE INFLUENTIAL ENGLISH garden designer and artist Gertrude Jekyll famously scattered nigella seeds in her Victorian clients’ gardens. This method nearly guaranteed that the flower, also known as “Love in a Mist,” would blossom two or three months later, unfolding in a bold blue she was crazy about.

Today, top gardeners are turning to the seed packet, dismayed by the predictable plant selections in mass-market nurseries or big-box stores. Varieties available in seed form are “more interesting,” said Worcester, Mass., horticulturist Matt Mattus, singling out Scabiosa and poppies as beautiful and cooperative flowers to sow directly.

Raising flowers and vegetables from germination until they generate seeds themselves at season’s end is deeply satisfying. “There’s a real thrill to watching seeds emerge,” said Paul Keyes, a landscape architect and gardening expert for NBC’s “Today.” “It’s a miracle.”

We canvassed professionals for the seeds that, when sowed directly into the garden, yield the most gorgeous, fuss-free flora. Give them a try. By midsummer, you’ll be able to respond to “oohs” and “aahs” of admiration with a justifiably boastful, “They’re from seed!”

“I use annuals and biennials—like larkspur, clary sage and columbine—to fatten up new borders because they always look thin the first couple of years. Recently, for example, we created a 30-foot-by-60-foot shade planting under a 125-year-old Linden tree with viburnums, hosta, epimedium and astilbe. I sowed in two kinds of foxgloves, the common Digitalis purpurea but with creamy white flowers, and the ferruninea, which is very tall and architectural. They jumped around, self-seeding, and filled out the bed. Most will get pushed out by the perennials in a couple of years. We use this technique often.”

— Louis Bauer, director of horticulture at Wave Hill, Riverdale, NY

“I grow plants from seed from Chiltern, in the U.K. I like the chocolate-colored Digitalis parviflora and the yellow hollyhock with fig-like leaves, Alcea rugosa. It is more resistant to rust than other hollyhocks.”

— Deborah Nevins, landscape designer, New York

“As a floral designer, I like to grow quirky things that you don’t often find at the flower market. Dark flowers and leaves are really hot right now, so I did a garden of deep purple zinnias, ‘Rubenza’ cosmos, wine-colored sunflower, purple Queen Anne’s lace, red amaranth and Wild...
Magic basil. I planted seeds densely, breaking all the spacing rules, and it looked great, really couture. When friends came over I’d hand them scissors, give them a Mason jar, and tell them they could cut their own bouquets.”

— Debra Prinzing, Seattle, Wash., floral designer and author of ‘Slow Flowers: Four Seasons of Locally Grown Bouquets from the Garden, Meadow and Farm’

“Certain plants just jump out at you because they have such beauty to them, like the Roughwood Golden Tiger tomato, which is orangy red with golden stripes and fuzzy gray leaves. Katie’s mustard lettuce is a crinkly chartreuse, and the leaves form bouquets. Buena Mulata, a
chameleon-like pepper starts out purple and changes to pink, orange, brown. It’s spectacular. And it has an incredible taste that you don’t get anywhere else.”

— William Woys Weaver, Devon, Penn., purveyor of the Roughwood Seed Collection, and author of ‘Heirloom Vegetable Gardening: A Master Gardener’s Guide to Planting, Seed Saving, and Cultural History’

“We grow about 50 kinds of herbs for medicinal and culinary purposes. One good one is Elecampane, an ancient herb for digestion. It grows 6 to 7 feet tall and is covered with enormous yellow flowers from June through August. They also last a long time in a vase. But my new favorite is Spilanthes, or electric daisy, a low, mounding plant with tons of sweet yellow thimble-like flowers. When you pop one in your mouth it feels buzzy, and kids love that. It’s been used medicinally since the Roman times. They issued a warning: may cause mirth!”

— Lisa Taranto, director of horticulture, Menla Mountain Retreat, Phoenicia, N.Y.

“You don’t see (or smell) sweet peas and Shirley poppies at the florist because they’re so delicate and fragile. I use Owl’s Acre Seeds and grow maybe 70 to 80 varieties of sweet peas and especially love the flecked and striped ones. Shirley poppies are probably the only annuals that bloom in colors like smoky purple, gray, and silver. They look like crinkled satin and are much more subtle than the Fruit Loop colors of Islandic poppies. I go a little crazy arranging the cut flowers I’ll do a whole row of the pinks or blues or purples down a table with about 30 six-inch glass containers I’ve collected.”

— Matt Mattus, Worcester, Mass., horticulturist and author of the forthcoming ‘Mastering the Art of Vegetable Gardening’

“I tried to grow Hellebore from seed because they are so beautiful, but they take years to come on. One year, I realized there were tons of seedlings under the leaves of older plants, and now I let them sow themselves. In spring, there can be five, 12, 100 seedlings. I scoop a clump carefully, let them fall apart and plant individually. You can make so many little plants that you can use them as a ground cover or give them to friends. Similarly, the fruit of my jack-in-the-pulpit flops to the ground in the fall, the moist flesh disintegrates over the winter and seeds sprout. Same with Trillium. Just don’t clean up there in the fall and pay attention come spring.”

—Ken Druse, Vernon, N.J.,
natural-gardening expert and
author of 'The New Shade
Garden: Creating a Lush Oasis in
the Age of Climate Change'

“Around April 1, I sprinkle the
first batch of Burpee microgreens
(bok choi, kohlrabi, broccoli,
beets, lettuces) into a container.
Their interesting textures and
colors are great accents to edible
flowers like pansies, viola and
nasturtium. I plant another two
weeks later, and then a third two
weeks after that so I have a
succession of them until frost. It
makes a beautiful container, you
can’t beat the tastes—in salads,
stir fries, steaming—and the
flowers decorate my plates all
summer. You can grow them
anywhere you get a little sun—even
on a balcony, even on a window sill.”

—Paul Keyes, landscape architect
and gardening expert for NBC’s
‘Today.’

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