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## Exotic Alliums

By Tammy Borden ©

The vase sat on my desk holding a few hosta leaves and only a single flower. But as coworkers passed by, each one couldn't help but comment. "What is that? I've never seen one of those before. It's gorgeous," one person exclaimed. Another stopped in their tracks. "Is that a flower? It's huge! It looks like something from outer space!" The single flower stood out on its own and didn't need an entire bouquet to make a statement. Why? The flower head measured nearly a foot wide and resembled a floral fireworks display.

It was an Allium. Not just any Allium, but a Christophii Star of Persia. As oohs and ahs continued, I heard someone say, "Oh, I could never grow something that exotic. I can't grow anything." I asked if they had tulips or daffodils in their yard and they said, "Yes, that's about the only thing I can grow because I don't have to do anything with those. They just come up every year on their own." "Well then," I said. "You have the qualifications for growing Alliums." When I began explaining that a package of five bulbs that produced the beautiful stems of star-like florets were purchased for under \$10 from a local home improvement store and planted last fall, they found it hard to believe.

Not only are they beautiful in a bouquet, but they make a bold statement in the garden. When in full bloom, Alliums are always the first flowers to get noticed by guests who visit. Even after they have bloomed and their color fades, the dried flower heads still add interest and texture. It is nearly fall, yet I still have the dried heads of several varieties of Allium dotted throughout my landscape, even though some bloomed as early as May.

Like tulips, the strap-like foliage of Alliums pushes through the cold earth early in spring. Unlike tulips, however, deer and other critters will shy away! Most are hardy to zone 3 or 4, but check individual varieties to be sure. When planting Alliums in your garden, try to position them behind low growing plants or garden sculptures because the foliage fades quickly once the flowers bloom. Once the foliage has turned completely brown you can remove it, but allow green foliage to remain so it can provide nutrients for next year's bloom.

When planting Allium, follow the same routine you would with other spring bulbs. In fall, select a site that will receive full to part sun. Dig your hole three times the dimension of the bulb. Note: bulbs can vary from as small as an acorn to as large as a baseball. The package should also give an indication of planting depth. Add some organic matter to the hole, and if you choose, you may also add some bulb fertilizer. Like other bulbs, Alliums don't like wet feet, so provide good drainage. Plant the bulb pointy side up, cover with dirt, water, and wait until spring!

Most Alliums will tower to three feet or more, so they add beautiful vertical interest to your garden. Plant in groups of 3 or more. With the larger varieties, a group of only three bulbs properly placed can stop traffic. The flower heads are actually made up of hundreds of tiny star-like flowers that when clustered together, form a stunning display. They are considered an ornamental onion, related to garlic and chives. There are nearly 400 varieties of Allium to choose from, each with different flower forms, color, size and bloom time. Here are the top five favorites from my garden, which are readily available...

### **Allium christophii 'Star of Persia'**

The huge wispy volleyball-sized flower heads stand atop 2' stems. Silvery purple flowers. Blooms in mid to late May.

### **Allium sphaerocephalon 'Drumstick'**

Intensely deep purple 1½" compact flowers atop thin, sturdy 30" stems. Blooms late June to early July. Inexpensive and makes a great display. Beautiful in bouquets.

### **Allium aflatunense 'Purple Sensation'**

Deep rosy purple blooms the size of a softball. Sturdy 30-36" stems. This is among the only Alliums I recommend dead-heading because of its tendency to reseed itself, producing hundreds of seedlings next spring that generally do not develop into viable plants. One of the earliest to bloom.

### **Allium 'Globemaster'**

Large, densely packed florets form a silvery purple flower head 8-10" across. Many consider this the best of all Alliums for its impressive display. Stands 30-36" tall. Highly sought after and a little more expensive than those noted above, but worth a spot in your garden.

### **Allium 'Mount Everest'**

White 4" flowers top 3-4' stems and bloom in late May and early June. The white blooms contrast beautifully with other purple varieties.