

My favourite cut flowers... with Beth Otway

I'd like to introduce you to some of my favourite cut flowers; these beautiful, easy-to-grow flowers don't require any cossetting. You can sow these flowers from seed this month directly where they are to flower, so there's no messing about with potting seedlings on, and no need for a greenhouse or any special kit or equipment.

There are so many fabulous varieties of *Nigella* available. I am particularly fond of *Nigella damascena* 'Double White', which I purchased from Sarah Raven. I have been growing this *Nigella* cultivar for quite a number of years now; I simply can't be without it. I enjoy the ferny-looking foliage produced by *Nigella damascena* 'Double White', and I adore its white ruffled flowers. The flowers are followed by attractive green seed heads, which increase in size as they develop towards maturity. The seed heads look wonderful in a vase and dry well too, but don't cut them all – leave some to self-seed for next year.

Chiltern Seeds stock *Nigella damascena* 'Albion Green Pod', which as its name suggests, produces white, ruffled flowers followed by green seed heads, and *Nigella damascena* 'Albion Black Pod', which produces white flowers followed by dark maroon-coloured seed heads. Consider growing both varieties to complement each other, although you may decide to opt for Chiltern Seeds' pack of *Nigella* species and forms mixed, or *Nigella damascena* 'Persian Jewels' mixed.

Lagurus ovatus 'Bunny Tails' is a super-hardy annual to grow; happiest when sown directly onto sandy soil, this lovely grass produces soft, silky panicles, which are green at first and fade to cream as they age. These pretty panicles, which resemble cute bunny tails, are easily dried and last

indefinitely.

Chiltern Seeds stock every colour of *Centaurea cyanus*, also known as cornflowers, from white to darkest maroon, pink, purple, and of course every shade of blue. Ideal for poorer soils, cornflowers will flower from June to September if you pick the flowers regularly.

Also favouring slightly poorer soils, *Gypsophila elegans* 'Covent Garden' is a delightful, single flowered *Gypsophila* that can be sown directly during April and May.

Sunflowers are real bringers of joy! Available in a range of colours and sizes, including dwarf varieties for containers, the tallest strains for world record attempts, and multi-headed varieties for cut flowers, you can sow every type of sunflower this month. *Scabiosa atropurpurea* produces large flower heads in colours from almost black, purple, pink, red, blue, and white. Sow directly from the end of April and throughout May.

Dahlias produce fantastic cut flowers. Whatever your favourite dahlia, you can plant their tubers outside from the middle of April onwards. Since I first saw Dahlia 'Café-au-Lait', I was smitten with its sumptuous, creamy peach-coloured blooms. However this lovely Dahlia is rather shy at flowering, only producing flowers sparsely and on occasion, so if you're short on space and want to grow an abundance of blooms, opt for another more floriferous dahlia.

I am head over heels in love with Dahlia 'Classic Rosamunde' which produces utterly charming, semi-double pink flowers all through the summer until the first frosts. My Dahlia 'Classic Rosamunde' plants are always much admired for their dark bronze coloured foliage and beautiful rose pink blooms, which are so popular with butterflies and bees.

Another of my firm favourites is Dahlia 'April Heather', a fabulous collarette type dahlia, which features soft yellow

petals bathed in blush pink – it's a real delight.

For more gardening advice for the month ahead, a calendar of specialist plant fairs and much more besides, visit my website www.pumpkinbeth.com