



How I got to know my
ALLIUMS

JACKIE CURRIE could not help wondering why some of her bulbs simply refused to last more than one flowering season. Here she describes putting her theories to the test

Alliums have a reputation: they can be difficult. Many of the well-known varieties flower the first year, only for more than half to disappear a year later, never to be seen again.

I have my theories as to why this happens – I am one of the National Collection Holders of *Allium* after all [the other is held by Peter Oldfield in Holsworthy, Devon]. I have methods to keep them going. But I felt I should seek out an expert. Who better than the man with the largest collection in the world, who also grows them commercially?

Steve (my husband, head of logistics, driver, bag carrier, chief photographer) planned our trip to meet Wietse Mellema via Schiphol Airport and on to the Noordoostpolder. Reclaimed after the Second World War, it is now the main area for Dutch bulb growing.

The immediate fields around Wietse's coldstore and glasshouses didn't seem to have any alliums at all, but it wasn't long before they were revealed.

First, Wietse patiently answered question after question. I had a lot stored up. He explained the process that all non-rhizomal alliums go through. The bulbs are planted out each year and are allowed to flower. Some are used as cut flowers, some as ornamental seed heads and the rest are cut to harvest the seed. All these bulbs are lifted, dried and kept at 25°C in a glasshouse until sold or replanted at the end of the summer for the following year.

We discussed which alliums are the easiest to grow and agreed that as a general rule they were the Northern Europeans, such as *A. ampeloprasum*, *A. angulosum* and *A. sphaerocephalon*. I was relieved to discover that Wietse also struggles with bulbs that I find difficult and they originate mainly from the Middle East.



■ *Allium* 'Millennium'

We discussed specific species, some of which may be familiar to you:

- *A. atropurpureum*: I struggle to keep alive more than 50 per cent through the first winter, Wietse loses 20-30 per cent of his each year
- *A. litvinovii*: we both find it virtually impossible to keep alive for more than a year
- 'Silver Spring': is really a species called *A. basalticum* from Israel and is difficult to keep going for more than a year
- 'Pink Jewel': is a pink version of *A. nigrum* and is difficult to keep alive the second year if not dried and heated. It reproduces via seed or by the very unusual method of producing small bulbils on the end of a leaf. That's not a typo, it really is on the end of the leaf
- The true *A. nigrum* does not produce any offsets and can be kept going only by seed. Over the years it has got muddled with *A. multibulbosum* (this used to be a synonym for *A. nigrum* but has now been reinstated).

And then out to the fields of flowering alliums. It was incredible to see so many shapes and sizes, from the largest *A. 'Summer Drummer'* at nearly 2m tall to *A. akaka*,

which is only 15cm high. The flowerheads of some of the *A. karataviense* were at least 25cm in diameter. The colour range was stunning, from the creams and whites of alliums such as *A.* 'Mount Everest' and *A. backhousianum* through the various pink shades of *A. komarovii* and *A.* 'Marshmallow' to the many shades of purple of most alliums, such as *A.* 'Violet Beauty', 'Beau Regard', 'Ambassador' and *A. stipitatum*. There were just two yellow alliums flowering, *A. moly* and *A. moly* 'Jeanine'. But my favourites were the rich dark wine reds of *A. atropurpureum* and *A. cardiostemon*, both standing out against a background of purples behind them.

I was like a child in a sweet shop, racing up and down the rows trying to take it all in. Steve suggested a less chaotic approach – that we might operate in a logical, sensible manner, working our way up one row and down the next.

In 1968 England and Wales grew 3,561 hectares of *Narcissus*, 1,781 of *Tulipa* and 207 of *Iris*. Defra no longer collects these figures. (Source: *The Growth of Bulbs*, A. R. Rees 1972).

It's a good thing we did. As we walked along one row I came across a solitary *Allium* that I never expect to own but have always wanted to see because it is so rare. *Allium regelii*, found in Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia, is about 25cm tall and very unusual. It has a look similar to a candelabra *Primula* with a stem with an umbel of flowers, a further stem, followed by a further umbel with another stem and a few more flowers on top of that. Wietse started with three bulbs and has managed to keep only one going. Sadly, it was in bud so I have no picture to wow you with.

The whole place was humming with bees and hoverflies. Each insect seems to prefer different alliums. The hoverflies liked only *A. caesium*, bumblebees preferred the *Nectaroscordum* (they used to be classed as *Allium*) and all the other alliums were equally loved by bumblebees and

honey bees. Wietse explained that summer allium species and varieties were highly attractive to bees and butterflies – just as I've found in my Collection on my allotment and in my garden.

On another field were summer-flowering alliums. Laid out in dense rows, they looked like low hedges, with green leaves that remain throughout the plant's flowering, with some being semi evergreen.

A few should be mentioned because they are good, long-lived and tough: *A. cernuum*, *A. senescens*, *A. nutans*, *A. angulosum* and *A. schoenoprasum* (chives) should not be forgotten. The latter was planted in thick rows of white, very pale lilac, mauve and pink that would make a very pretty addition to any garden.

In another row *A. obliquum* and *A. fistulosum* stood out because of their height. *A. obliquum* has a flowerhead the size of a ping pong ball, and is a soft lemon yellow colour. Leaves sheath three quarters of its slender stem. *A. fistulosum* is an architectural rather than pretty allium, with a very thick hollow stem that tapers to the base of the round creamy white flowerhead.

Although I had seen most of these alliums, I'd never seen them in such profusion and I'm grateful to Wietse for encouraging me to visit him and for the time he took to discuss them with me.

The trip confirmed many of my theories: that each species needs to be treated differently depending on soil conditions and region of the world from which it comes; that some alliums have a limited life even if given perfect conditions; and if you want longevity and toughness, go for the summer-flowering varieties – they are stunning when grouped together and are beloved by insects. 🌸

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Chives in all colours



Allium 'Pink Jewel' bulbil

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Steve Currie in summer-flowering Allium field

HOW TO OVERCOME YOUR DISAPPEARING PLANTS

After the visit I've regrouped my alliums into the following categories:

Lift: they need a dry summer rest

- 1 large bulb, reproducing from seed only
- 1 large bulb, reproducing from seed or bulbil in the leaf
- Bulb splits into 2 or 3 all viable as well as seed
- Bulb splits into 2 or 3 all viable but seed sterile
- Mother bulb and many offsets as well as seed

Don't need to lift

- Rhizome and seed
- 1 large bulb, reproducing from seed only
- Bulb splits into 2 or 3 all viable as well as seed
- Bulb splits into 2 or 3 all viable but seed sterile

Lift to separate all offsets but don't need a summer rest

- Mother bulb and many offsets as well as seed



Allium carinatum subsp. pulchellum



Allium karataviense cultivars in Holland