Go all in on summer alliums

Attractive, easy to grow, and pollinator friendly, these perennials are worthy of a spot in your garden

BY RICHARD HAWKE

Some years ago, during a midsummer trip to Wisconsin, I found myself transfixed by a vast planting of ‘Summer Beauty’ allium dotted throughout with taller bright pink coneflowers (Echinacea spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9). To my eyes, this perfect pairing of complementary colors but contrasting floral forms was simply brilliant, and the hum and dance of bees and butterflies brought it all to life. I think this was the moment when I truly came to appreciate alliums.

‘Chivette’
At a glance
Allium spp. and cvs.
Zones: 2–11
Conditions: Full sun; well-drained soil
Native range: Alpine regions of the Northern Hemisphere
Propagation: Simple division in spring or fall
Pests and diseases: Occasional leaf spot, mold, onion fly, thrips
Top-rated alliums

Summer Peek-a-Boo®

‘Falling Stars’

‘Windy City’
Alliums, or ornamental onions, make up a diverse group of garden plants that includes spring-blooming bulbs, culinary herbs, and durable perennials with persistent foliage and bountiful summer flowers. Bulbous alliums—the ones with flowers as big as a kid’s head, or routinely photographed with one for size comparison—are marvels of the spring garden. Not all are big-bloomed or as tall as a toddler, but some—like the eye-popping purple balls of towering ‘Globemaster’ (A. ‘Globemaster’) or the 12-inch spidery pink globes of Schubert’s allium (A. schubertii) set a high bar. While these impressive flowers create garden drama, the dormancy that follows is less thrilling; the often outsize leaves can take what feels like months to die away, flopping over neighboring plants in the meantime and leaving gaping holes behind.

On the other hand, rhizomatous alliums—still bulbous but modified—act more like perennials, producing dense clumps of persistent grassy-to-straplike leaves that largely remain attractive to the last days of summer. Their individual flower heads—technically umbels—may be smaller but are more bountiful per plant than spring bloomers and extend the summer floral show into fall. And though gardeners love alliums in all their guises, bees and other pollinators are super fans! In fact, it is hard for me to think of alliums without the accompanying frenetic soundtrack of buzzing bees.

Our perennial allium trial at the Chicago Botanic Garden evolved organically from a simple comparison of ‘Summer Beauty’ to Summer Peek-a-Boo®, its compact doppelganger. I added ‘Millenium’ at the suggestion of a friend. While we were watching and ranking these initial alliums, others like them crept into the market and into our trials. I have a feeling this is just the beginning, but the following summer alliums have put on the most impressive show so far.

**Trials**

The Chicago Botanic Garden has evaluated 20 select alliums since 2010. Besides observing their ornamental traits, we monitored the plants to see how well they grew and adapted to environmental and soil conditions, while keeping a close eye on any disease or pest problems and assessing plant injuries or losses over winter.

**How Long:** Minimum three years

**Zone:** 5b

**Conditions:** Full sun; well-drained, alkaline, clay-loam soil

**Care:** We provided minimal care, allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions.

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White-flowered ‘Falling Stars’ (A. cernuum ‘Falling Stars’) was a bit of a sleeper to me until it fruited. There is no doubt it is a pretty form of the typically pink-flowered nodding onion (A. cernuum)—a reference to the sharp crook that points the 2-inch flower clusters downward in a shower of stars in late summer. The purple-brown fruits are surprisingly attractive at their peak, but it is the yin and yang of the pure white flowers juxtaposed to the ripening dark fruits that captivates me. The gray-green leaves, thicker than those of the species, pale to light green with some tip damage as the season goes along. On my ornamental scale of 1 to 10, the grassy foliage lands in the middle. There is nothing wrong with it; I just find it less interesting than the deep greens of some other alliums.

Protruding white anthers add sparkle to the dark rose-purple umbels of ‘Windy City’, a standout feature of this 2015 introduction. The 2-inch starburst-like, mostly sterile flower heads open in early summer and put on a spectacular show for about six weeks. The glossy dark green foliage is particularly lush in the early season; leaf tips may yellow or brown in summer, although it was not too troubling. ‘Windy City’ has a uniform robust habit to 21 inches tall in bloom—while the leaves form a clump that is 10 inches tall and 30 inches wide. In my mind,
I always pair ‘Windy City’ with the softer habit of a grass such as ‘Carousel’ little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* ‘Carousel’, Zones 3–9) and then imagine how its rosy flowers and purplish fruits blend with the red-purple, pink, and copper tones in the grass stems.

‘Summer Beauty’ (*A. tanguticum* ‘Summer Beauty’) was developed in the Chicago area but quickly found fans farther afield. Lilac-pink flowers, in 2-inch globes, are plentiful in midsummer, drawing in pollinators of all stripes for about a month. The glossy, deep green leaves remain freshly verdant from spring to fall, forming bushy mounds with wiry flower scapes that rise 8 to 12 inches above the foliage. Leave the sterile fruits intact for seasonal interest; the winter skeletons are delightful etched in frost or dusted in a snowy mantle.

‘Millenium’ is the standard by which other alliums are judged; its popularity has grown steadily since it was introduced at the turn of this century. (The misspelling is regrettably intentional.) Each rosy purple flower head, like a plump lollipop, tops a sturdy stem to 20 inches tall. Taken all together, the passel of nearly 2-inch spheres—dozens densely packed on every plant—is a fabulous midsummer spectacle. Dark green strappy leaves, bunched in generous clumps, are handsome and healthy throughout the summer and fall even as flower scapes turn brown. The botanical architecture of the flower—reminiscent of Bertoia’s sunburst sculpture—takes on another dimension when the tan fruit capsules split late in the year. Enjoy the full floral show without worrying about unwanted seedlings, because ‘Millenium’ is essentially sterile. It is also proving to be cold hardy to boot. I have read reports of ‘Millenium’—commonly listed for Zone 5—growing well in Zone 3 gardens in Canada.
Pretty much everything about Texas allium (A. texanum) was a surprise. At 3½ inches wide, the creamy white to pale yellow pom-poms were the largest in the trial and showy for about a month in early summer. Even the individual starry flowers were bigger—5⁄8 inch, compared to the more typical ¼ inch of other alliums. The clumps of twisting leaves are a bit loose, but the naked flower scapes stand tall at 24 inches. Texas allium cannot be compared to ‘Millenium’ or others of its kind, because the blue-gray leaves go dormant after flowering. As a design point, make it an accent among grasses and perennials that will cover the bare bases rather than massing it. New tufts of blue leaves sprout late in fall after the flower scapes have withered. This plant is native to wet areas, road sides, and lowlands in Texas and Oklahoma, and although it likes a moisture-rich soil, it is drought tolerant too. Those conditions sum up our test site perfectly, so there is no surprise it is happy here!

Noteworthy new kids

Although too new to our trial to be fully evaluated, these notable alliums are worthy of praise. Keep an eye out for them when you’re at your local garden center or browsing your favorite online nurseries.

‘Lavender Bubbles’ is a newbie, with only one year in the trial—but what a year it was! One of the last to bloom, this allium has 3-inch dark purple bubbles that put on a fantastic show in late summer. The tendency is to compare all alliums to ‘Millenium’, and I get that, so ‘Lavender Bubbles’ blooms later and is darker purple. The twisty blue-green leaves are handsome with or without flowers, and as scapes grow above the foliage, their crooked tips gradually straighten out by the time flower heads open. Plants were small when first planted in spring, but ‘Lavender Bubbles’ was an overachiever, reaching 19 inches tall and 26 inches wide in its first season. I think it is a safe bet that ‘Lavender Bubbles’ will only get better in its second year.

‘Big Beauty’ for a few years, although it was only officially introduced in 2021; the breeder let us preview it early. At the start of summer, scores of 3-inch globes open progressively over nearly two months. This extended flower show (the longest in the trial) may not pack the color punch of other alliums with condensed bloom periods, but the soft pink flowers are plentiful and pretty at every stage—and, notably, they sustain pollinators longer. The moments just before the plump silvery pink buds burst is as satisfying as the fully open flowers; in bud, the flower head is more open, which showcases its internal architecture beautifully. The wide, strappy, gray-green leaves stay healthy all summer on full bushy plants.

Being a sport of ‘Millenium’ naturally raises the expectations for ‘Serendipity’—I know all you middle children can relate—but ‘Serendipity’ stands firmly on its own merits. The vibrant, rosy purple flowers almost glow at their midsummer climax. As with ‘Big Beauty’, we enjoy the show just before the buds pop as much as the flowers at peak, but unlike ‘Big Beauty’, all the flowers seem to open at the same time in a shorter period. The 2½-inch flower heads are slightly larger than those of ‘Millenium’, and the attractive foliage is blue-green rather than dark green. ‘Serendipity’ has an attractive, uniform upright habit; a smattering of yellow leaves after flowering is not too distracting.
CULTURE

The secret to summer allium success

When given proper conditions and care, summer alliums are stellar, reliable performers in the landscape. Here are some insights into these perennials that can help you manage and enjoy them to the fullest.

• LOCATION. While there are woodland species, these summer-blooming alliums are best grown in full sun and average to fertile well-drained soil. Avoid heavy clay and soggy conditions. These plants are drought tolerant once established.

• PLANTING. The summer alliums featured here are generally sold as rhizomatous plants. You will find them potted in nurseries in spring, and they can be planted much the same as any other perennial.

• PRUNING. Alliums make excellent cut flowers for fresh and dried floral arrangements. Beyond that, deadhead as desired. Persistent fruits can be ornamental in the garden late in the year, and while some hybrids are sterile, reseeding is a real issue for other alliums. If desired, scraggly foliage can be cut back after flowering to encourage a fresh surge of growth. Otherwise, cut faded dormant leaves back to the ground during fall cleanup.

• PESTS AND DISEASES. Alliums are rarely troubled by pests and diseases. High soil moisture, however, can lead to rot, mildew, and fungal leaf spots and molds. Plants are occasionally susceptible to onion fly and thrips.

• DIVIDING. To make more plants, manage overgrown clumps, or rejuvenate tired alliums, divide plants in early spring. These plants are pretty forgiving; you can also divide them after flowering in late summer or early fall if you do not mind them looking a little rough for the remainder of the gardening season.

• WILDLIFE. Bees and butterflies are tireless visitors when alliums are flowering. Their foliage—pungently aromatic when bruised or broken—deters most rabbits and deer from munching.
### Allium Flower Color Rating Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RATING</th>
<th>ALLIUM</th>
<th>FLOWER COLOR</th>
<th>FLOWER SIZE</th>
<th>BLOOM PERIOD</th>
<th>FOLIAGE COLOR</th>
<th>PLANT HEIGHT</th>
<th>PLANT WIDTH</th>
<th>ZONES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘August Asteroids’</td>
<td>lavender</td>
<td>2¼ in.</td>
<td>midsummer to early fall</td>
<td>bright green</td>
<td>24 in.</td>
<td>30 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not rated</td>
<td>A. ‘Big Beauty’</td>
<td>soft pink</td>
<td>3 in.</td>
<td>early summer to late summer</td>
<td>gray-green</td>
<td>27 in.</td>
<td>27 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘Chivette’</td>
<td>lavender-purple</td>
<td>1¼ in.</td>
<td>late spring to early summer</td>
<td>bright green</td>
<td>21 in.</td>
<td>24 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not rated</td>
<td>A. ‘Lavender Bubbles’</td>
<td>dark purple</td>
<td>3 in.</td>
<td>early summer to late fall</td>
<td>blue-green</td>
<td>19 in.</td>
<td>26 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘Chivette’</td>
<td>lavender-purple</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>late summer to early fall</td>
<td>gray-green</td>
<td>26 in.</td>
<td>42 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘MGsmpkb13’ (Summer Peek-a-Boo®)</td>
<td>light purple</td>
<td>2¼ in.</td>
<td>midsummer to late summer</td>
<td>dark green</td>
<td>18 in.</td>
<td>36 in.</td>
<td>4–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘Millenium’</td>
<td>rosy purple</td>
<td>2¼ in.</td>
<td>midsummer to early fall</td>
<td>dark green</td>
<td>26 in.</td>
<td>27 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not rated</td>
<td>A. ‘Serendipity’</td>
<td>rosy purple</td>
<td>2½ in.</td>
<td>midsummer to early fall</td>
<td>blue-green</td>
<td>24 in.</td>
<td>27 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘Summer Music’</td>
<td>purple</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>midsummer to late summer</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>22 in.</td>
<td>20 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. ‘Windy City’</td>
<td>dark rose-purple</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>early summer to midsummer</td>
<td>dark green</td>
<td>21 in.</td>
<td>30 in.</td>
<td>5–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★</td>
<td>A. angulosum</td>
<td>pale lilac</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>early summer to late summer</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>26 in.</td>
<td>28 in.</td>
<td>4–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. caeruleum</td>
<td>sky blue</td>
<td>1 in.</td>
<td>late spring to early summer</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>20 in.</td>
<td>8 in.</td>
<td>3–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. canadense ‘White Flag’</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2½ in.</td>
<td>early summer</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>27 in.</td>
<td>30 in.</td>
<td>3–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. cernuum</td>
<td>very light purple</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>midsummer to early fall</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>22 in.</td>
<td>24 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★★</td>
<td>A. cernuum ‘Falling Stars’</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2½ in.</td>
<td>midsummer to early fall</td>
<td>gray-green</td>
<td>32 in.</td>
<td>26 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>A. cernuum ‘Wine Drop’</td>
<td>pink</td>
<td>2½ in.</td>
<td>early summer to midsummer</td>
<td>light green</td>
<td>24 in.</td>
<td>22 in.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★</td>
<td>A. senescens</td>
<td>light purple</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>late summer to early fall</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>16 in.</td>
<td>12 in.</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★</td>
<td>A. senescens ‘Pink Planet’</td>
<td>lilac-pink</td>
<td>2½ in.</td>
<td>midsummer to early fall</td>
<td>blue-green</td>
<td>20 in.</td>
<td>12 in.</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★★</td>
<td>A. tanguticum ‘Summer Beauty’</td>
<td>lilac-pink</td>
<td>2 in.</td>
<td>midsummer to late summer</td>
<td>dark green</td>
<td>20 in.</td>
<td>22 in.</td>
<td>4–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not rated</td>
<td>A. texanum</td>
<td>creamy white</td>
<td>3½ in.</td>
<td>early summer to midsummer</td>
<td>blue-gray</td>
<td>24 in.</td>
<td>20 in.</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Potential Sources

- Bluestone Perennials, Madison, OH; 800-852-5243; bluestoneperennials.com
- Brent and Becky's Bulbs, Gloucester, VA; 877-661-2852; brentandbeckysbulbs.com
- Romence Gardens and Greenhouses, Grand Rapids, MI; 888-907-5268; romencegardens.com
- White Flower Farm, Litchfield, CT; 800-503-9624; whiteflowerfarm.com

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