

A STEP AHEAD

Influential cut flower growers are always ahead of the curve: when they highlight a breathtaking flower, demand for it leaps. Here, a selection of growers reveal the next floral must-haves

Icelandic poppy 'Champagne Bubbles Pink' is a beautiful coral shade that's loved by Rachel Siegfried of Green & Gorgeous.

Rachel Siegfried

Rachel has been growing cut flowers at her Oxfordshire farm, Green & Gorgeous, since 2008. She shares which seeds she's excited about sowing this autumn: pretty pastels and perennials

Icelandic poppies are one of our best sellers and work well sown in autumn. There's a lovely coral one called *Papaver nudicaule* 'Champagne Bubbles Pink' that's very popular, but I'm trying to develop a pastel range because pastels – buttermilk-yellow, soft peach – are popular colours for any flower where wedding florists are concerned, and those colours aren't easy to get hold of in Icelandic poppies. They're biennial and I find sowing in autumn and overwintering in a cold greenhouse or coldframe seems to work better than having seed in the ground where it can rot off.

Another plant that's fantastic from an autumn sowing is the range of **Camelot foxgloves**. Because they're an F1 hybrid, they have superb quality flowers and great consistency in stem length.

We grow about five different types of cresses or lepidium. If they're sown in autumn they are so much taller and much more productive. From April or May and into June they give you a lovely green feathery filler for when you're making up bouquets, so they're a very worthwhile group to look at. I've grown one this year called *Lepidium* 'Emerald Beads', which is my favourite.

From a sustainable point of view, perennials are a subject close to my heart and autumn is a good time to sow many of them, especially the first-year flowering types such as achillea, catananche and silene. They'll give you a generous quantity of flowers in June the following year, then they're there for around three years before they fade away, depending on your soil type. I say they're short-lived, but I've got some *Pennisetum villosum* that have been in the ground for about six years, so it's worth a go. With perennials, people get better germination when the seed is fresh – it's more important to have fresh seed for perennials than it is for annuals.

Ranunculus acris 'Citrinus' is one of our best-selling perennials. Sow it in autumn and it pretty much always comes true from seed. It's a well-behaved buttercup that doesn't take over in any way. It's lovely in May: little flecks of it look magical with single peonies.

Join a Seed Saving Workshop on 3 or 8 September or learn how to Grow Your Own Cut Flowers on 15 September. Book online at greenandgorgeousflowers.co.uk and shop the range of seeds.



Rachel Siegfried



Lepidium species



Ranunculus acris 'Citrinus'



A Camelot foxglove



Campanula takesimana



Barney and Victoria Martin



Phlox drummondii 'Crème Brûlée'



Rosa 'Ispahan'

Victoria Martin

With her husband, Barney, Victoria Martin runs Stokesay Flowers, growing romantic garden classics in a Shropshire walled garden

We're trying to grow more perennials and we're particularly enjoying campanulas at the moment, especially *Campanula takesimana*, the Korean bellflower. Its dusky purple bells last so well. We've been growing it from seed, but clumps can be divided to make millions more plants. Hardy garden chrysanthemums are another lovely perennial for cutting. Soft pink *Chrysanthemum* 'Vagabond Prince' is an absolute favourite, not least because of its name, and we also love the classic 'Uri', with magenta pink flowers, and 'Emperor of China' with its purple-pink starry blooms.

We also want to grow lots more trees and shrubs, to tread lightly in the garden and make life easier for ourselves. We've been having success growing clematis from seed, such as the really lovely yellow one, *Clematis tangutica*. We have an 80 per cent germination rate with that, so it's really good. Our customers are almost all event florists and the flowers need to look ravishingly gorgeous – the more tendrily and garden-y the better, and clematis are perfect for that magical, enchanted look they can't get from the mainstream suppliers. We also grow loads and loads of roses. We used to focus

on the popular David Austin varieties, but our personal preference is for the old roses. Customers love those roses with unusual stripes and splodges, but one of the best for cutting is *Rosa* 'Ispahan'. You can also put a stick of it in the ground and get hundreds more of them because it roots so easily from cuttings. 'Climbing Cécile Brunner' has curled up pink rose buds of absolute perfection, which unfurl into equally lovely flowers.

Although we're trying to move away from annuals, we always get drawn back in because they're so pretty, and every time there's a new variety we always want to try it. This year we're trying *Cosmos* 'Versailles Blush' for the first time, for its subtle looking flowers, which are so interesting. It's the same with the little annual phloxes – varieties of *Phlox drummondii*, such as dusky pink and peachy cream 'Crème Brûlée' and creamy yellow 'Isabellina', and all those really nice ones.

Visit stokesayflowers.co.uk for more information and to buy a copy of Victoria's book, *Favourite Roses for Cutting*.

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Milli Proust and Paris Alma

Operating as Alma|Proust, Milli and Paris supply cut flowers to florists and for weddings, run flower-arranging classes and sell seeds – their own and varieties from US-based Floret Flowers

The seeds from Floret Flowers, Erin Benzakein's flower farm in Washington, USA, are amazing and we are so excited to be able to facilitate growers here in the UK being able to try them. The colour palettes include incredible soft colours – they have iridescent qualities and the soft yellows, muted pinks and peaches are really useful for tonal design.

The **celosias** sold out fast but we still have lots of beautiful things, including zinnias and dahlias. The celosias are interesting because people assume they need hot weather or are only good under cover, but it's just that they don't grow as tall outdoors – and nobody really needs celosias that are 1.5m tall! It's traditionally been hard to get hold of celosias in interesting colours, so I think that's why the Floret Flowers cultivars have proved popular, with their blooms in dusky hues of soft pink, mauve and orange.

We have a passion for sweet peas and grew 70 different varieties this year. We're constantly on the lookout for exciting new ones, and **Lathyrus odorata 'Kings Ransom'** is gaining momentum with a colour I can only describe as 'smoky watermelon'. It starts off a fresh shade of coral and turns an almost bruised blue as it fades.

We love violas and pansies. They're so sweet to grow and they're the perfect cut flower for beginners. Grow them close together so

they produce longer stems – under cover we can have 50cm stems on our pansies. You can also sow them at almost any time of year, which makes them unique. We sow some in September on top of our tulip bulbs. Our favourite is **Viola 'Brush Strokes'**, which is so painterly and beautiful, and also the wild pansy or heartsease, **Viola tricolor**. I've had 60-70cm stems on them – they look really special in bridal bouquets because you can't buy them from the market: only gardeners grow them.

Nasturtiums are not an obvious cut flower but their flowers are so pretty and we love their lily-pad leaves, too. **Tropaeolum majus 'Tip Top Pink Blush'** is a fairly new variety in soft apricot-peach – it's not one of those garish nasturtiums. We also love **'Ladybird Rose'**, **'Purple Emperor'** and all those other smoky colours.

Another favourite is silene. We like the bladder campion, **Silene vulgaris 'Blushing Lanterns'**, and we've saved some seed of what we think is the perfect silene: a very pale pink **Silene dioica** that's really useful for the 'hungry gap' in the flower-growing world in May. They last well as cut flowers and are easy to grow from seed.

Visit milliproust.com to shop Alma|Proust seeds and seeds from the Floret Originals range.



Zinnia 'Lilliput Salmon'



Sweet pea 'Chrissie'



Claire Brown



Eryngium planum 'Blue Glitter'

Claire Brown

Plantpassion is Claire Brown's artisan flower farm in the Surrey Hills, where she and her team grow sustainable, seasonal flowers

I'm growing more perennials next year. I've always grown quite a few, but with climate change and where we're located it can be very dry and I need perennials that can get their roots down and deal with that. I'm growing a much wider range of eryngiums, which are popular in gardens and are brilliant on my dry soil. They're also great for drying, and as dried flowers are becoming increasingly popular I'm doing a lot more of them. The eryngiums are wonderful because so many varieties look completely different. I'm growing cultivars of *Eryngium planum* such as **'Blue Glitter'**, **'White Glitter'** and **'Blue Hobbit'** as well as *Eryngium bourgatii* from seed and, from root cuttings, *Eryngium x zabelii* **'Big Blue'**.

We also grow a wide range of different varieties of **strawflower** (helichrysum) for dried flowers. I think they're amazing – we've always grown them and until recently we sold them fresh, but then in 2020, when we lost three-quarters of our business, we started drying them and I realised we could double the amount we grow because we could sell the dried ones in winter. I've been saving my own seed, but pretty colours and mixes are available from most of the seed companies. Peach *Helichrysum bracteatum* **'Salmon Rose'** from Chiltern Seeds or ruby-red **'Pomegranate'** from Plants of Distinction are both nice single-colour varieties to try.

I'm always looking for new sweet peas, and I took part in the Royal Horticultural Society's trial of Grandiflora types last year. Grandifloras are fantastic because they offer a really long season. I'm growing two that were given the Award of Garden Merit in the trial: **Lathyrus odoratus 'Valentine'**, a white cultivar that is absolutely perfect for weddings, and **'Chrissie'**, which has beautiful flowers of lavender-blue and incredibly long stems. Try englishsweetpeas.co.uk for seed of both.

Zinnias are all the rage and over the years I've trialled various varieties and found that the best ones for me are the mixes of **'Lilliput'** zinnias or the **'Dahlia Flowered'** zinnia cultivars. I lost about 1,000 dahlias in the winter of 2022-23, so last summer I only had 150 of them left. I'm used to having a lot more – they really are key plants here – so instead we grew extra zinnias and they did really well and saved the day. We sow them early in plugs and make sure we transplant them at exactly the right size: you cannot let them get checked at any point, the timing has to be just perfect! ■

For details of Claire's flowers, plus flower farm experiences including workshops, open days and pick-your-own dates, visit plantpassion.co.uk



Milli Proust and Paris Alma



Celosia 'Rose Gold'



Sweet pea 'Kings Ransom'



Silene vulgaris 'Blushing Lanterns'

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