



The Bulbs of Summer

Add an exotic touch to your garden with an alphabet's worth of summer-blooming bulbous plants from *Agapanthus* to *Zephyranthes*.

BY DAVID J. ELLIS

MOST OF US have an established design or theme in our gardens, but even the most conservative gardener enjoys trying something slightly exotic or unusual to add a splash of color in a bed or container. One easy way to accomplish this is with bulbous tropical or subtropical plants that bloom in summer. The plants profiled in this article are selected from those I have tried over

the last two decades in my Maryland garden along with others recommended by experts in different regions of the United States. Many of these plants are hardy only in the warmest regions of

This combination of *Agapanthus* 'Headbourne Hybrids' blue flowers and dangling clusters of white flowers on summer hyacinth (*Ornithogalum candicans*) brings to mind white clouds in a blue summer sky.

the country but can be grown as annuals or container plants in most gardens. Others may perennialize in moderately temperate gardens—or can be dug in fall and stored indoors during winter. With the increased minimum average temperatures American gardeners have experienced over the last few decades, it's worth experimenting with some of these plants in regions where they were not previously successful.

AFRICAN LILY, AGAPANTHUS

(*Agapanthus* × *hybridus*, USDA Hardiness Zones 7/8–11)

Native to southern Africa, African lilies are rhizomatous bulbs in the onion family. Clumps of elegant, straplike foliage emerge in midsummer, followed by globular clusters of purple, blue, or white flowers on long stems. There are both evergreen and deciduous varieties. Some hybrids are hardy to USDA Zone 7 (possibly 6), but the limiting factor for success in temperate gardens is their aversion to winter moisture. “It’s a great plant for Mediterranean climates like California, but difficult for the rest of us,” says Brent Heath, co-owner of Brent and Becky’s Bulbs in Gloucester, Virginia. “However, it can be grown successfully in containers if you can give it a warm, dry dormant period in winter.” Selections to consider include ‘Ellamae’ (Royal Ama™) (dark blue flowers on four-foot stalks) and ‘Storm Cloud’ (dark blue flowers on three- to four-foot stems). Short selections suited for containers include ‘Peter Pan’ (blue flowers on one- to two-foot stems) and

‘Snow Storm’ (white flowers on two- to three-foot stems).

Planting and care Plant the bulbous rootstock so the crown is just below soil level in free draining, loamy soil. They will thrive in full sun or part shade; afternoon shade is advisable in regions with hot summers. Once established, they are fairly drought tolerant.

CRINUMS, SWAMP LILIES

(*Crinum* spp., Zones vary by species)

Members of the amaryllis family, crinums are found in tropical regions around the globe, usually in marshy or seasonally wet habitats. Growing from large bulbs, crinums develop clumps of broad, straplike leaves that are evergreen in regions with mild climates. Striking clusters of lilylike flowers bloom on upright stems in late spring or early summer. Recommended crinums include the hybrid ‘Ellen Bosanquet’ (Zones 8–10), a classic southern passalong plant with large, deep pink to burgundy flowers on three- or four-foot stems. “It’s pretty long-blooming for a crinum and has a sweet fragrance,” says Pam



Crocosmia ‘Prince of Orange’



Crinum × *powellii*

Baggett, a garden writer and former nursery owner in Cedar Grove, North Carolina. Other choices to consider are Powell’s crinum (*C. xpowellii*, Zones 6–9), a hardy hybrid with fragrant pale pink or white flowers on two-foot stems, and fragrant white-flowered swamp lily (*C. americanum*, Zones 8–11), which is native to wetlands in the southern United States.

Planting and care Crinums are adaptable to a range of soils and will tolerate drought when not in active growth. If you’re pushing the envelope on their hardiness range, plant them up to a foot below the soil surface.

CROCOSMIAS

(*Crocosmia* hybrids, Zones 6/7–9)

In the category of easy-to-grow bulbous perennials for summer bloom, crocosmias have few rivals other than lilies. Growing from corms, these iris family members from subtropical Africa send up tight clumps of rapier-thin foliage two to three feet tall in late spring or early summer. Soon thereafter, tidy clusters

of funnel-shaped, bright red, orange, or yellow flowers unfurl at the end of arching spikes, drawing hummingbirds. Dozens of cultivars are available, including time-tested and vigorous ‘Lucifer’ (bright red flowers). More compact selections include ‘Solftare’ (yellow flowers and bronze-tinted foliage) and ‘Emily McKenzie’ (orange flowers with red bases).

Planting and care Plant corms two to four inches deep in free-draining, moderately fertile soil in full sun. They are fairly drought tolerant but should be watered during prolonged spring or summer dry periods. Clumps spread slowly (they can spread rapidly in fertile soil) and should be divided every two to four years to maintain vigor.

PINEAPPLE LILY

(*Eucomis comosa*, Zones 7–10)

Whether planted in the ground or in a container, pineapple lily is a surefire conversation starter. Native to the tropics of southern Africa, this lily relative forms a rosette of straplike leaves in early summer. Two- to three-foot spikes of densely clustered, greenish white flowers with pink or purple highlights bloom in mid- to late summer. Each spike is crowned with leafy bracts that look like the tops of pineapples. Baggett grows them in a perennial bed with companions such as bronze fennel and purple euphorbias that mirror the pineapple lily’s coloring. ‘Sparkling Burgundy’, a selection with deep purple foliage, “is a real tough plant that comes back reliably,” says Baggett.

Planting and care Plant bulbs six to eight inches deep (more shallowly in containers) in a sunny spot in fairly fertile, free-draining soil. Water regularly while in active growth. Divide bulbs every five years or so to ensure continued vigor.

ABYSSINIAN GLADIOLUS

(*Gladiolus murielae*, syn. *Acidanthera bicolor*, Zones 8–11)

Prized for its fragrant, evening-blooming flowers, Abyssinian gladiolus is easy to grow in borders or containers. Native to eastern Africa, this iris family member grows from corms to form clumps of upright foliage two to three feet tall. Its white flowers, graced with a maroon or chocolate-colored splotch around the base of the petals, bloom in late summer to early fall. “The longer you garden, the more you appreciate plants like



this,” says Scott Kunst, the now-retired founder of Old House Gardens nursery in Ann Arbor, Michigan. “They are beautiful from when they first start forming flower spikes.” According to Kunst, they are well suited to coastal regions. “We grow them as annuals, but you can dig them and store them over winter very easily,” he says.

Planting and care Plant corms two to three inches deep in free-draining, moderately fertile soil. They do best in full sun except in warmer regions, where afternoon shade would be beneficial.

GLORIOSA LILY, FLAME LILY

(*Gloriosa superba*, Zones 8–11)

Native to open woodlands of southern and central Africa, this sprawling climber in the naked-ladies family grows from a fleshy tuberous rootstock. Its wiry four- to six-foot stems are cloaked in sparse, lilylike leaves featuring twining tendrils. The striking red-and-yellow flowers, composed of six curling tepals with crinkled



Gloriosa superba 'Rothschildiana'

edges, bloom on side shoots in mid- to late summer. It can be trained on a mailbox or trellis, grown up through a shrub, or allowed to sprawl out of a container. Brent Heath says gloriosa lilies are “a cut-and-come-again plant—you take old flowers off and new ones develop” that make excellent cut flowers. ‘Rothschildiana’ is a vigorous selection with large flowers. Note: All parts of gloriosa lily are poisonous.

Planting and care Plant rootstocks horizontally in free-draining, moderately fertile soil (a blend of coarse sand and organic matter is ideal). Full sun is best

except in very hot regions, where they appreciate some afternoon shade.

SUMMER HYACINTH

(*Ornithogalum candidans*, syn. *Galtonia candidans*, Zones 6–9)

These asparagus family members, native to South Africa, look like spring-blooming hyacinths on steroids. Large clumps of straplike leaves emerge in early summer, followed by four-foot spikes of fragrant, drooping, creamy white flowers that open in mid- to late summer, drawing pollinators of all kinds. The foliage can look a bit unruly late in the season. “They tend

Sources

Brent & Becky’s Bulbs, Gloucester, VA. www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com.
Old House Gardens, Ann Arbor, MI. www.oldhousegardens.com.
The Southern Bulb Co., Golden, TX. www.southernbulbs.com.

Resources

Garden Bulbs for the South (2nd edition) by Scott Ogden. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2007.

Sunset Western Garden Book (9th edition), edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel. Sunset Publishing, Menlo, CA, 2012.

Tropical Plants and How to Love Them by Marianne Willburn. Cool Springs Press, Beverly, MA, 2021.

to bloom around the time daylilies peter out,” says Jim Shields, who for many years was president of Shields Gardens, a former mail-order nursery in Westfield, Indiana.

Planting and care Plant bulbs six to eight inches deep and at least a foot apart in a sunny site with free-draining, moderately fertile soil. Watch for slug or snail damage.

GIANT CHINCHERINCHEE

(*Ornithogalum saundersiae*, Zones 7–10)

Another ornithogalum almost worth growing just for its delightful common name (it is sometimes called star-of-Bethlehem, but that name is better reserved for its weedy relative *O. umbellatum*), this plant announces its presence with a clump of straplike leaves in early summer. In mid- to late summer, large clusters of star-shaped, creamy white flowers with greenish black eyes bloom atop three- to five-foot spikes. “It provides extremely long lasting flowers in the garden and in the vase,” says Heath, who grows it at the back of the border in his tropical garden. These South African natives tend to be a one-year wonder in the garden, but can be dug and stored overwinter or planted in containers. Although fairly easy to grow from seed, they do not exhibit the self-seeding tendency of *O. umbellatum*.

Planting and care Plant bulbs two to four inches deep and four to six inches apart in free-draining, loamy soil in full sun. Once established, they are relatively drought tolerant.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Because a number of the plants in this article are from the Southern Hemisphere and require a dry, dormant period in winter, planting them in sites with free-draining soil is vital. Amend garden or container soil if needed with a combination of either coarse sand or fine gravel and organic matter such as compost or leaf mold.

In regions where bulbs are borderline hardy, look for planting sites in warm microclimates, such as at the base of south- or east-facing walls or foundations.

It may be tempting to get these bulbs in the ground the first warm day in spring, but avoid planting summer bulbs too early. "Most summer-flowering bulbs should not be planted outdoors until the soil temperature is above 60 degrees or they become more susceptible to fungal diseases," says Brent Heath. To give bulbs a head start, plant them so their crowns are just above the soil level in a container and place them under a growing light. Move them outdoors once the soil is warm enough. —D.J.E.



Ornithogalum saundersiae

RAIN LILIES

(*Zephyranthes* and *Habranthus* spp., Zones vary by species)

Rain lilies, sometimes called zephyr lilies, provide serendipitous delight with their tendency to magically bloom after summer showers. Native primarily in the southern United States and Central and South America, these diminutive amaryllis family members tend to do best in containers for most American gardeners, but a few species thrive outdoors in free-draining sites in Texas and the Gulf Coast states.

"Rain lilies are one of the most endearing summer bulbs for southern gardens," says Chris Wiesinger, owner of Southern Bulbs Co., a mail-order nursery in northeastern Texas. "They provide a lot of bloom for little bulbs and are easy-to-work-with, versatile plants." Wiesinger recommends 'Labuffarosea' (sometimes listed as 'Labuffarosa'), a hybrid selection that grows four to eight inches tall. Its two- to four-inch-wide, trumpet-shaped, pink and white flowers bloom in late summer to fall. Unlike most rain lilies, white rain lily (*Z. candida*, Zones 8–10) thrives in seasonally moist sites. Wiesinger plants them in pots submerged in water, but says they also do well in bog gardens. Blooming in late summer to fall, they have small, star-shaped, creamy white flowers. Ata-



Zephyranthes candida

masco lily (*Z. atamasco*, Zones 7–10), native to the American Southeast, is another species suitable for bog gardens. It grows two to three feet tall with narrow, rounded leaves and fragrant white spring flowers.

Wiesinger sometimes mixes rain lilies in with low groundcovers such as liriopie, but prefers growing them in pots. "The nice thing about having them in pots is you can keep them close to the house to enjoy them in the heat of summer," he says. "You forget about them and then all of sudden it rains and they pop back into your life."

Planting and care Plant rain lilies only an inch or so deep and leave little space between bulbs. In containers, they are reputed to bloom more vigorously when crowded. They grow best in full sun or part shade and, with the exception of the two species mentioned above, require free-draining soils. ♡

David J. Ellis is editor of The American Gardener. This article is a revised and updated version of one published in the May/June 2012 issue of the magazine.