

Sow Unusual

Martin & Janet Blow love growing exotic looking hardy plants from seed



It's such fun to have something exotic in your garden to draw envious looks from your gardening friends. It's even better when the plants are hardy perennials grown from seed at a fraction of the cost of full grown plants.

The great thing about growing unusual perennials from seed is the tremendous range available and the low cost means you can experiment with hardiness or plant a large drift without breaking the bank. Some perennials can take one, two or even four or five years to flower from seed but I have picked out some that should give some flower in their first year.

You might need to search the seed catalogues for these or even better join a plant society that issues a members' seed list such as the Hardy Plant Society, Cottage Garden Society or Alpine Garden Society.

All the plants mentioned below can be sown in late winter or spring in a little heat using standard seed compost. Remember to transplant the seedlings into pots as soon as they have their second pair of the leaves as seed compost has little food in it and they will stop growing.

One of my favourites from seed and always reliable to flower in the first year is the exotic looking *Commelina*. This is relative of the *Tradescantias* we grow as house plants but they are fully hardy in well drained soils. The common name is *Sleeping Beauty* as the brilliant blue flowers close each afternoon and open again in the morning. I find these beauties will self-sow into a gravel path or you can collect seed to sow in the spring to make more plants.

Foxgloves are commonly grown from seed and varieties like Pam's Choice make a pleasant change in colour from the wild types. There are also some perennial species from southern Europe and these can only really be grown from seed. The Milk Chocolate Foxglove (*Digitalis parviflora*) forms neat rosettes and has masses of chocolate brown flowers in summer. This is one for a sunny, dry soil as is its cousin the Rusty Foxglove (*Digitalis ferruginea*).

Some of the more exotic looking Sages are easy from seed. The Sliver Sage (*Salvia argentea*) has large, woolly-coated leaves and whorls of purple tipped, white flowers in summer. Another unusual one to try from seed is the Yellow Sage (*Salvia flava megalantha*).

The Purple Sunflower (*Berkheya purpurea*) is a spiky, thistle-like plant from South Africa with large pale purple flowers in summer. These are really easy from seed and its far easier growing new



"The brilliant blue flowers close each afternoon"

Photo: SpecialPerennials



"Rusty Foxglove is one for sunny, dry soil"

Photo: SpecialPerennials



"Sliver Sage has whorls of purple tipped, white flowers"

Photo: SpecialPerennials

continued >>>

plants than trying to divide up these unbelievably prickly plants. You might find the seeds listed as Zulu Warrior or Silver Spike – all of them are the same!

One of the most exotic looking flowers in our garden came from tiny, almost dust-like seed from a garden society and is now the largest and showiest plant in our garden. That is Devil's Tobacco (*Lobelia tupa*). It's incredible to think that an 8ft (240cm) plant will grow from such tiny beginnings. The seedlings are so small that is impossible to separate them into individual plants so we just prick out a clump of seedlings to pot on. Although hardy they need a whole growing year to establish in the ground so we keep them in pots in a greenhouse through their first winter and plant them out in the following spring.

Slightly trickier to germinate than those above is the Leopard Lily (*Belamcanda chinensis*) because the seed compost must be kept quite moist at all times to be successful. The reward is short plants with exotic looking freckly flowers in summer – indeed another common name is "Freckle Face".

Giving your garden an exotic look using hardy plants grown from seed is simple and rewarding. What are you waiting for?

Janet & Martin run SpecialPerennials nursery from their garden in Cheshire. Plants are available at Plant Hunters Fairs and by mail order. They are always happy to bring an order to a plant fair for collection.



"It's incredible to think that an 8ft (240cm) plant will grow from such tiny beginnings"

Photo: SpecialPerennials