

BIG ideas for small plants

Easy Alpines

In recent years, alpine plants seem to have acquired a reputation for being difficult to grow, and only suitable for the specialist gardener. This is very far from the truth. While some of the plants seen at AGS shows can be difficult or almost impossible to grow in the open garden (Dionysias from Iran and Afghanistan and some Androsaces from high in the European Alps, for example), the vast majority of alpines are easy to grow in most gardens, and need only the minimum of care. The maintenance of a herbaceous border, for example, takes far more work than a similar area planted with easy alpines.



Dianthus squarrosus

But why grow alpines?

Climate change is becoming a subject of increasing concern to British gardeners, with dryer summers and hosepipe restrictions. The good news is that there are many alpine plants from southern Europe and elsewhere, which are very drought-resistant when established and flower freely, especially in spring, summer and autumn.



Veronica gentianoides

With modern gardens becoming smaller, a wider range of smaller alpines can be grown in a limited space.

You can grow alpines without a rock garden. Year-round interest can be obtained with alpines planted in a sink or trough placed on a patio, or even planted into the crevices between paving stones in patio or path.

With alpines you can travel the world without leaving your own garden.

Easy Alpines

When is the best time to buy?

The simple answer is: 'whenever you see a plant that you like'. Easy alpines are readily available in many nurseries and garden centers, although, naturally the range will be wider in the more specialist nurseries (The AGS supplies a separate list of these). A visit to an AGS Show is a good idea too, as there will be a number of specialist nurserymen at each one. All of them will be happy to advise you on the best plants to choose for your garden and how to care for them, and the advice will be free!

When is the best time to plant?



Pulsatilla vulgaris

Although pot-grown alpines can be planted out at any time of year, they establish more easily if planted in March or April. At this time of year the soil is still moist and beginning to warm up, so the roots will begin to grow vigorously, and be able to settle-in before the warmer, dryer weather arrives. If the soil is moist and the weather not too hot, September and October can also be suitable. At other times of year, you may have to pay more attention to watering until the plants become well-established.

How to plant

Many alpines, by their very nature, have very long, deeply questing roots. When you have selected your planting site, dig a hole approximately the same diameter as the pot. Knock the plant out of its pot and inspect the roots. You will often find that the roots spiral around at the base. Using your fingertips, gently squeeze and probe the root ball to disentangle the roots and tease them apart. You may be surprised by the result; a small plant in a 7 cm pot may well have roots from 30 – 60 cm long! Lower the roots into the planting hole, deepening it if necessary, then refill it, gently firming the soil as you go. Finally, give a thorough watering and the job is finished. If planting is done in cool spring weather, you may never need to water the plant again! If your soil is fairly heavy, a layer of coarse gravel over the surface can increase the life expectancy of some plants to many years. In addition it will keep down weeds and reduce maintenance time; a good thing for busy people!

Plant lists

The lists include only plants tried and tested over many years. Figures in brackets give the typical height in cm of a plant in flower, and the spread after a few years growth (about five, but exactly how many will depend on soil type and water supply!). Many of the plants listed will continue to increase their spread, but are easily trimmed after flowering to keep them tidy and compact.

Easy Alpines

The drought-busters

Ideal for hot, sunny places, these are the ideal plants to cope with global warming!

Aethionema pulchellum

Grey foliage and pretty pink four-petalled flowers; short-lived but seeds about without becoming a nuisance. (10 x 10)

Aubrieta deltoidea

A garden favourite for over a century. Flowers in many colours: white, pink, red, purple (8 x 40)

Crepis incana

A Turkish pink dandelion with grey-green foliage. Well-behaved: does not seed down. Flowers all summer (10 x 20)

Pulsatilla vulgaris

A British native from chalk downlands but grows in any soil. Very deep roots. Do not try to move once planted. Many named forms with flowers in white, pink, lilac, violet, purple. Lovely! (20 x 20)



Aethionema pulchellum



Crepis incana



Ranunculus calandrinoides.



Sempervivum



Thymus serpyllum

***Ranunculus calandrinoides*.**

From the Atlas Mountains in North Africa. Pale pink buttercup flowers on and off throughout the year. (15 x 10)

***Sempervivum*.**

The houseleeks are tough! There are hundreds of species and cultivars in a rainbow of different colours, many of which change with the seasons. (10 x 15)

Teucrium ackermanii

Grey foliage and sheets of pink flowers in late spring – early summer. (5 x 30)

Thymus azoricus

Pale, fresh green foliage and white or pale pink flowers in summer. Highly scented! (3 x 20)

Thymus serpyllum

Darker green foliage. Flowers white – deep red – purple in summer. Bees love it. (3 x 30)

***Zauschneria californica*.**

A loose-textured informal Californian with orange-red flowers for a long time in summer (30 x 30)

The best of the rest

More good performers for ordinary conditions.

Anacyclus depressus

For a long period in summer, this plant from Morocco bears a succession of white daisy-flowers over a compact mat of dissected leaves. The purple outer surface of the petals gives a nice contrast. It is commonly known as the Atlas Mountain Daisy. (5 x 40)



Anacyclus depressus

Campanula cochlearifolia.

A cute little bellflower. The nodding flowers on wiry stems come in a range of blue shades, and white. Some campanulas can be very invasive, but this one is usually well-behaved. (5 x 30)

Delosperma nubigena

A South African 'succulent'. The fleshy leaves give this a tender look, but it is very hardy if given good drainage. Wonderfully glossy bright yellow 'Livingstone Daisy' flowers for a long period. (3 x 30)

Dianthus squarrosus

The loose mats of blue-grey leaves are decorative alone, but in summer they erupt into a mass of fringed white 'single carnation' flowers. The scent is super too! From the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. (15 x 30)

Erinus alpinus

A short-lived miniature with spikes of flowers in varying shades of pink or white, produced over a long period. Seeds about without becoming a nuisance, as it only has tiny roots. A little gem that no one should be without. (5 x 5)

Sedum spathulifolium

Widespread from British Columbia to California. This has small rosettes of fleshy leaves, and heads of bright yellow starry flowers. There are various forms with differently-coloured leaves: 'Purpureum' takes on purple tints in hot and sunny weather; 'Cape Blanco' has yellowish tints and a dusting of flour-like farina. (10 x 20)

Sisyrinchium 'E. K. Balls'

Leaves like a miniature flag iris and mauve flowers in spring-summer. Some sisyrinchiums set seed too freely and can become pests. This plant sets none, so is very well-behaved. (10 x 10)

Veronica gentianoides

From Turkey. Spikes of pale china-blue flowers above shiny green rosettes of leaves. 'Variegata' has attractive cream edges on the leaves. Increases slowly (15 x 15)

Verbascum x 'Letitia'

This versatile plant could also have been placed in the 'drought busters' section. The pointed grey-green leaves are covered with soft silvery hairs. Spikes of good yellow flowers emerge in summer. If these are cut off when they go over, a second flush is normally produced later.