

Perennial Centaurea for the garden

Centaurea can make ideal garden plants with varieties suitable for the border, scree garden and rock garden or meadow plantings. With over 600 species of annuals, biennials and perennials there's plenty to choose from but many are frankly weedy so some care is needed.

We have a large collection of perennial types and this article is based on our experience of using them in our own garden.

Centaurea were named after the Centaur Chiron who in Greek Mythology used plants of the genus to heal his wounds. Many Centaurea are said to have wound healing properties including our native *Centaurea scabiosa*.

They are members of the Asteraceae family and so have composite flowers – a central globular disc surrounded by florets (rays) (Figure 1). They hail mainly from Europe (especially Mediterranean and Southern Europe), West Asia and, (few only), America.



Figure 1: Typical Centaurea flower structure

It isn't just the flowers that provide garden interest. Many varieties have grey leaves often divided into lacy filigree. The flower buds are clothed in woody, shiny or spiny scales and can be almost jewel-like (Figure 2).

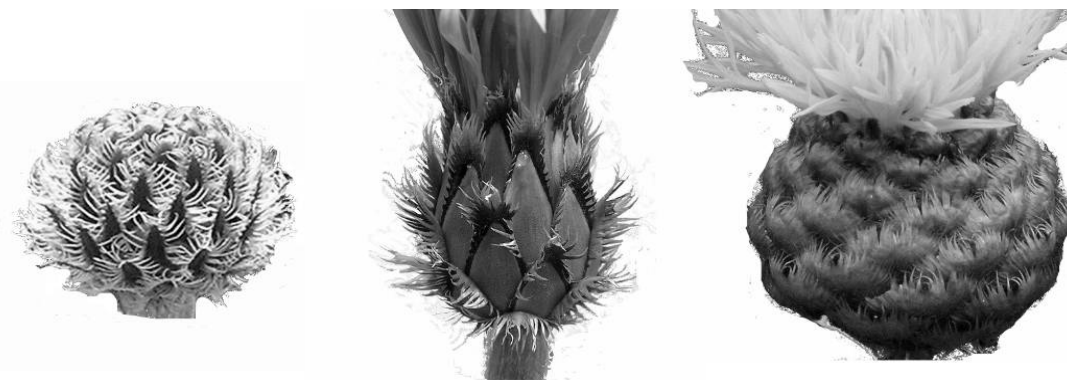


Figure 2: Centaurea buds. L-R *C. atropurpurea*, *C. montana x triumfettii*, *C. macrocephala*

Common names include Cornflower, Knapweed and Dusty Miller plus there are numerous folk names for the British natives.

Most are cold hardy (all mentioned here are) but some require good drainage to survive the winter wet. If kept in pots over winter you might find that the shoots root off over winter but don't throw away the pots as they normally reshoot from their roots.

Native species

One of my favourite natives is *Centaurea nigra*, known as Hardheads or Common Knapweed. It grows in all kinds of grassland including chalk cliff tops. It does very well on acid clay as well. It is a favourite of bees and butterflies all through the summer. It is naturally varying in flower shape and colour, and we also grow the variety **Elstead** which has larger, frillier flowers. We have also been lucky enough to be given a pure white version (to be named **Waterfall White** after the farm it occurred on). Normally *nigra* gets to 2ft 6in tall in poor soil and more like 4ft in improved garden soil. *Centaurea nigra* grows on our village green where it is regularly mown down and its flowers at no more than 4 inches tall – an obvious candidate for the Chelsea chop!

Another native, Greater Knapweed (*Centaurea scabiosa*), grows well in our garden as does its white variant (*form albiflora*), which has been cultivated from a single plant spotted in the wild near Pershore.

All of these plants like an open sunny site and are completely trouble free. They can be propagated by seed, division and root cuttings.

Border varieties

There are many varieties suitable for the garden that enjoy the rough and tumble of the crowded border or naturalistic planting.

Centaurea macrocephala has perhaps one of the most iconic flowers of the genus. The large globular yellow flowers resemble a giant thistle or cardoon flower. The buds are deep bronze and attractive in their own right. The branched stems carry flowers for only a short period in mid summer and unlike most types they don't rebloom even if dead headed. And it would be a shame to dead head too promptly as the dead ray florets form a wig of brown hair atop the head-like seed pods (*macrocephala* = big head). If the seed heads are left through the winter they provide food for finches and small mammals. The leaves are tongue shaped and rather course. For a more refined look to the border choose *Centaurea glastifolia* (Figure 4) with its candelabra stems topped with silver-scaled buds and yellow flowers that are a smaller version of *macrocephala*. Again this variety rarely reblooms after its mid summer glory.

There are quite a few varieties with feathery silver-backed leaves and large pink flowers. They are distinguished by the shape and form of the buds but behave the same in the garden liking normal soil sun or almost very light shade. All benefit from regular dead headings and a hard prune after a flush of flower has finished. These include *Centaureas woronowii*, *nogmovii*, **John Coutts**, and *dealbata*.

John Coutts is shorter and perhaps weaker growing than the others. With this exception they need some room to



Figure 3: *Centaurea scabiosa*



Figure 4: *Centaurea glastifolia*

grow and may need a few twiggy supports if grown in rich soils. The variety *dealbata Steenbergii* has intensely coloured deep rose flowers.

Centaurea jacea has feathery pink flowers and rough haired stems and leaves. It represents a very complex group of species over which there is much debate and to-ing and fro-ing of names. From this group we also grow *phrygia* with similar flowers but different shaped buds and the cultivar **Caramia**, which seems to be a hybrid between the two. All are easy and self supporting and really popular with bees.

Most gardeners will know *Centaurea montana*, the Mountain Bluet, for its purple blue flowers, grey-green leaves and low growing, running habit. Most plants in this group will run but not all so vigorously as the basic species: indeed some we wish would be more vigorous! They are also known for getting powdery mildew by mid summer. The solution is to cut back hard and dispose of diseased leaves and stems and to regularly lime acid soils.

There are lots of *montana* varieties with more arriving all the time. The white-flowered **Alba** (Figure 5) has black stamens and hint of purple at centre when mature. More delicately petaled is **Lady Flora Hastings** but identical in other respects to Alba. **Carnea** is flesh pink, and **Joyce** mid rose. **Parham** is similar to Joyce at first but soon takes on a lavender tone. **Gold Bullion** has flowers the same as the species but the bold yellow of the leaves seem to enhance the flower colour making it appear more intensely blue. **Jordy** (aka Jody aka *C.jacea* Jody) is a hybrid including *montana* (but almost certainly not with *jacea*!) with deep burgundy flowers – a “must have” plant. There are several purple flowered varieties including the royal purple **Purplea** and the slightly paler **Violetta**. **Purple Heart** is white with an attractive purple centre as does the identical **Amethyst in Snow**.

The rare *montana Ochraleuca* has ivory white flowers and may be a hybrid with the glorious *Centaurea cheiranthifolia* (figure 6) which has very similar but bigger flowers. The latter is one of our favourites with its very large ivory white flowers over a long period.

Closely related to *montana* is the lower growing *Centaurea triumfettii*, indeed **Blewit** is a hybrid between the two introduced by Joe Sharman.

One of the loveliest varieties is *triumfettii* **Hoar Frost** with its white flowers with just a breath of pink just tinting them. **Blue Dreams** is a quite recent introduction from Joe Sharman that, unsurprisingly, has clear blue flowers.

The lowest growing of this type is the ground hugging *triumfettii ssp. stricta* with lavender or pinkish flowers on 4 – 6in stems. The rarer variety *triumfettii ssp. can var. rosea* appears identical to the lay gardener (like me!)

If we ever get another hot dry summer again you’ll notice that *triumfettii* varieties may become dormant until rain comes again.



Figure 5: *Centaurea montana* Alba

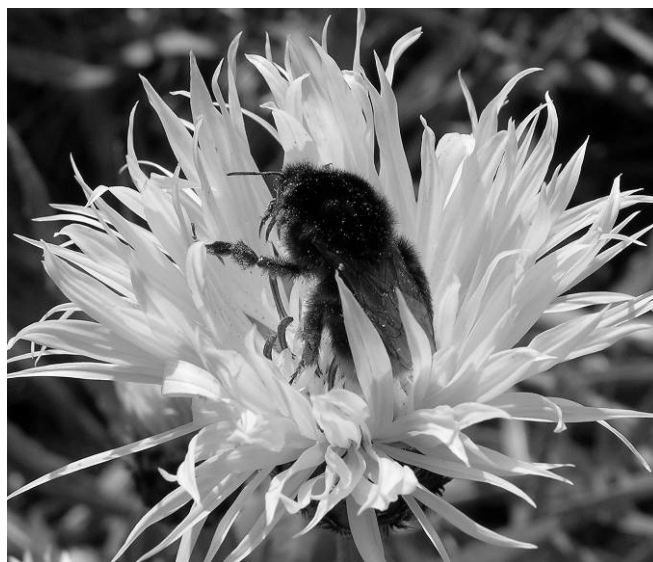


Figure 6: *Centaurea cheiranthifolia*

Low growing varieties.

For the alpine garden there are many varieties with new species being discovered all the time in the Middle East / southern Europe. *Centaurea pulcherrima* (“Beautiful”) (figure 7) has been grown in British gardens for some time for its pink cornflowers, elegant buds and silvery-grey leaves. It is distinguished from the very similar *bagdadensis* by its buds – pale brown soft versus dark tan, hard. One alpine type where I’d recommend not investigating the buds too closely is *C. rupestris* with small yellow thistle flowers and long, nearly invisible spines on its buds – ouch! This is actually quite touchy to grow often rotting off in summer if not given really good drainage. It does, however, often re-sprout from its roots. *Centaurea simplicicaulis* and her big sister *C. bella* (= pretty) form low mounds of ferny, grey-green leaves and have pale pink flowers on short stems, *bella* being slightly taller. These two are great subjects for edging a bed or border.



Figure 7: *Centaurea pulcherrima*

Centaurea for wildlife

Centaurea are one of the best bee plants in the garden, particularly for bumblebees. In our garden we have spotted many species of bumblebee regularly visiting Centaurea in large numbers including Large Red-Tailed Bumblebee (figure 8), Carder Bees, Buff-Tailed Bumblebee, White-Tailed Bumblebee and Early Bumblebee.

Butterflies are also attracted to the flowers to fuel up with nectar.

Whilst deadheading flowers is useful for us gardeners, it's well worth leaving seed heads on varieties such as *nigra*, *scabiosa*, and *alpestris* to allow charms of goldfinches (and occasionally Redpolls) to come take their fill of the seeds, even in mid summer and particularly through the winter.



Figure 8: Large Red-Tailed Bumblebee on *Centaurea nigra*

About the authors

Martin and Janet Blow, run SpecialPerennials.com, a small specialist nursery in Hankelow Cheshire CW3 0JB

“We hold the National Collection of Heleniums. We have applied for National Collection status for Perennial Centaurea. Descriptions, photos and growing guides for many varieties of Centaurea can be found on our website. Martin is also available to give talks to garden clubs and societies.

Our small, plant packed garden at Yew Tree House, Hankelow, Cheshire is open for the National Garden Scheme in 2011 on July 2nd, 3rd, 16th, 17th, 23rd, 24th, August 6th, 7th, 13th, 14th and September 3rd, 11th. Special Helenium open days are on August 20th & 21st. Group visits to the garden at other times are very welcome.

Plants are for sale by mail order, on garden open days and at plant fairs across the area”.

See our website: www.specialperennials.com, email: plants@specialperennials.com or phone: 01270 811443 / 0771 699 0695.

All photos © SpecialPerennials.com.