

## Growing Heleniums

### Planting

**Note: All Heleniums are toxic if eaten and can cause skin irritation in some people.** Heleniums are extremely bitter, so are unlikely to be eaten by mistake. Wash hands after handling. They are poisonous to grazing animals who avoid them. They are therefore rarely (if ever) eaten by rabbits and deer.

Heleniums grow in a moist, meadow soils in their native habitat. Their roots are shallow and wide spreading. So they like a moisture retentive soil incorporating garden compost, but there is little point in digging this in deeply. Mulches or compost or bark are good to keep moisture in as well. We have dry, free-draining soil and we get by by watering the plants in hot weather about twice a week.

Heleniums need sun to get their true colours. We have experimented with slightly shaded sites – stick to yellows and apricot shades in these positions; the reds just don't colour up in shade.

Plant anything from 9in (24cm) to 2ft 6in (75cm) apart depending on how many plants you have. Heleniums start to grow new roots in late February / early March in Cheshire UK and this is a good time to move or plant large plants. This is also the time to divide but unless your soil is warm we would recommend potting up divisions and only planting them out when they have a good root system. Protect newly planted divisions from slugs and snails.

Dividing plants is easy. Lift a clump and shake off the soil. For pot-grown plants tease out the roots and wash off the compost. Some types will almost fall apart into separate rosettes. Some need a little pulling apart. Others (usually the dwarf types) need to be carefully broken apart taken care not to snap off the new shoots. Heleniums grow new root from the bases of the stems and also from the ends of existing roots, so its okay to cut the roots back if potting up.

### Growing

Keep them well watered! Tall types may need staking in exposed sites as do some of the old cultivars like Moerheim Beauty and Kupfersprudel. Staking of short to mid-height types is best achieved by using twiggy sticks to add support. Tall types can be corralled with string and two or three stakes if growing a clump. Single plants can be tied in to a stake.

You can practice the “Chelsea Chop” and cut plants back by about 6in in late May. This reduces eventual height, creates bushy plants and makes them flower later. We don't do this at all! Pinching out tips is just as effective at bushing up plants and the tips can be used as cutting material.

Deadheading will greatly prolong flowering, either with scissors bloom-by-bloom

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or with shears taking no more than 4-6in off the top.

Plants should be deadheaded to prevent seeding of inferior plants into the clumps.

Cut stems down to the ground in Autumn when flowering is over. This helps prevent rotting from soggy leaves falling into the clumps and reduces the chance of carrying pests and diseases from year to year.

### **Pests and Diseases**

Heleniums are generally trouble free in the UK. The problems that rarely affect them in the UK are not life threatening to the plants and usually clear up through good garden hygiene and growing conditions.

Slugs and snails may be a short term problem on young foliage, but most plants shrug this off as they grow. Greenfly may infest plants and in really dry weather it is worth looking into the growing points of the leaf rosettes and rubbing off any greenfly that may lurk there. Spraying is not really needed.

One rare but serious problem is eelworm. These are microscopic "worms" that infest the internal tissues of the plants causing stunted and distorted growth. Any plants looking unhappy or misshapen should be destroyed. You can check for the presence of eelworm by cutting up a leave and placing it in a glass of water. After about ½ hour hold the glass to the light and (using a magnifying glass) look for tiny white worms wriggling about in the water. If you have eelworm, remove and burn the plants, disinfect any secateurs or scissors used on the plants and don't plant helenium or phlox in the same ground for 3 or 4 years. Thankfully this is a very rare problem and best prevented by only buying plants that are obviously healthy.

### **Propagation**

Division of plants is covered above. Tip cuttings can be taken in late spring and root quite easily.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

Q. Why has my Helenium died over winter?

Answers:

Often old, undivided plants or plants they have been in pots from previous years will die. The crowns become congested and rots set in.

Dying leaves falling into the crowns can cause rots.

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Slugs and snails are active from late January onwards: are you?

Dividing plants in Autumn usually results in failure – the small plants aren't able to cope with the cold and wet.

Q. The lower leaves are falling off in summer.

A: This is natural reaction to hot, dry conditions and usually affects taller varieties. In the border this isn't a problem – shorter plants in front will hide any bare stems. Remove any dead brown leaves. Ensuring the plants never dry out completely will reduce leaf loss.

Q. Flowers are small and the petals are rolled and curled. Is this eelworm?

A. No. This is the early warning sign of drought. Give the plants a really good wetting and see the results in a few days!

Q. I bought a red variety and the flowers have opened up with yellow and orange stripes.

A: All red varieties do this – wait a couple of days and the full red colour will develop. If the site is too shady the full colour won't develop. Move plants to a sunnier spot.

Q: The flowers are tiny with green “petals”.

A: These are developing buds not the mature flowers. The green calyxes extend first looking like stylised sunshines (but green!). In a few days the petals will start to show just above them.