

Hardy Geraniums

by Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener, Ottawa-Carleton

Name a plant you can trim with your lawnmower and that still continues to bloom. As I learned from watching an interview with Phoebe Noble, the answer is hardy geraniums. Ms. Noble grew geraniums under the trees in her B.C. orchard. Not only did the plants act as a ground cover, they offered the additional benefit of attracting pollinators to the orchard. A mass planting of this scale would be a “dead-heading nightmare” so Ms. Noble used her riding mower to cut them back. Within weeks, these tough garden sprawlers came back looking refreshed and ready to put on a second show of blooms.



Geranium sanguineum var. striatum

This hardy geranium, *Geranium* spp., also called “cranesbill” because its seed head resembles the bill of a crane, is very different from the annual plant that has the common name geranium. The latter, with its lollipop-shaped cluster of flowers, is found in many patio planters and is actually a *Pelargonium* spp.

With over 300 species and many more cultivars, the Geranium family is very large. There are annual, biennial

and perennial forms with many of the perennial species being hardy to our region. There is a geranium for nearly every location. They tolerate most types of soil and will take sun or part-shade.

The 1-5cm flowers come in the white, pink, mauve and blue hues and are often streaked. Some are continuous bloomers and some are repeat bloomers if cut back after the first bloom. The leaves are also of interest with varying textures, shapes, and colourations. Sometimes the foliage is aromatic.

Geraniums can be propagated from division or seed. They can spread quickly to form a large patch and are easily transplanted to other areas of the garden.

One of my favourite geraniums is *G.* ‘Anne Folkard’ whose new foliage is tinged with gold – the perfect backdrop for its deep magenta flowers with an even darker eye-zone.



Geranium 'Rozanne'

Another favourite, *G.* ‘Rozanne’ is a continuous bloomer with 5cm blue blossoms. Rozanne tends to lounge, so

by September she is well over a foot into my lawn. Since the plant grows from a central crown, I simply roll the stems back onto the flowerbed, pass the lawnmower over the lawn and unroll the plant back into its sprawling position.

For interesting foliage, try *G. wlassovianum*, *G. thunbergii* ‘Jester’s Jacket’ or *G. x. oxonianum* ‘Katherine Adele’. These all offer variegated foliage, some green and white, some mottled with purple.



Geranium cinereum 'Ballerina'



Geranium 'Tanya Rendall'

G. cinereum ‘Ballerina’ or *G.* ‘Tanya Rendall’ are two dwarf cultivars. These dainty plants excel in an alpine bed or at the front of a border where they can be viewed up close. Both form a perfect mound with purple-red flowers held above the foliage.

My final recommendation is a particularly dark pink cultivar of *G. oxonianum* that was discovered in Phoebe Noble's garden. It is a continuous bloomer and was appropriately named *G. oxonianum* 'Phoebe Noble'.

Just remember, while you can trim mass plantings with your lawnmower, the garden shears will do the job in smaller spaces.



Geranium oxonianum 'Phoebe Noble'