

## HARDY GERANIUMS

*Jim Faustgen*

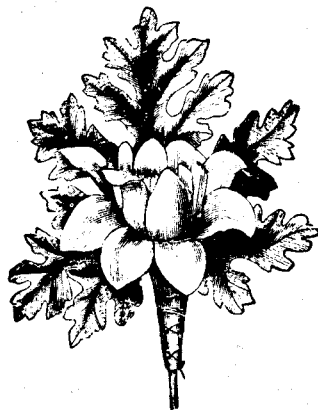
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Hardy geraniums are not to be confused with the much-loved annual bedding and container plants, which are in the genus *Pelargonium*. *Geranium*, which includes over 300 species, is one of the most versatile groups of plants a northern gardener has to work with. These plants have been grown since the 16th century in England and southern Europe. The common name cranesbill refers to the seed-carrying fruit capsules which are shaped like a beak and spew forth seeds when ripe.

Several species make excellent ground covers, filling in quickly and inhibiting weed growth. Others can be used as edging or accent plants, or as specimens in rock, sun, shade or wildflower gardens. Many species tolerate both shade and sun. They all like a well-drained, humus-rich, but moist, soil and summer mulch. Some have beautiful, scented foliage that turns a handsome red or orange color in fall.

Flower petals number five, are cup- or saucer-shaped and come in an array of colors ranging from white to purple. Many species have deeper-colored veining in the petals. Flowers are produced in leaf axils or clustered at the stem tips above the leaves. Leaves are lobed to varying degrees, palmate and hairy.



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The plants have thick, spreading rhizomes and a tough root stalk. Propagation can be by division in early spring or fall; stem cuttings taken in summer; or seeds harvested before they are ripe and sown in a warm (70 degrees Fahrenheit) seedbed, where they'll be ready for transplanting in three to five weeks.

Hardy geraniums are generally pest free, but the possibility exists for leaf spot or botrytis, and an occasional Japanese beetle.

Some common *Geranium* species are listed below. For descriptions of the many cultivars available, refer to your favorite perennial plant catalogs.

*G. dalmaticum* grows only four to six inches tall, with a spread of 12 inches. It is well suited to the rock garden, where it will form dense cushions of one-inch mauve flowers. It spreads by rhizomes but is not invasive. Foliage is rounded, glossy, funnel-shaped and lobed, and forms a low ground cover that is shade tolerant. *G. dalmaticum* blooms from late spring into early summer. (USDA Zone 4)

*G. endressii* grows 12 to 18 inches tall and spreads to about 18 inches. It blooms from May to September, is drought tolerant, and is a clump former that makes a good ground cover. It prefers cool weather. Flowers are bright pink and funnel-shaped with dark pink veins. (Zone 4)

*G. himalayense* [*G. grandiflorum*] grows 12 to 15 inches tall and spreads 18 to 24 inches. The two-inch, saucer-shaped flowers are violet-blue with purple veins. The showy flowers are borne on terminal clusters above the leaves. The deeply cut leaves turn red or yellow in fall. *G. himalayense* blooms heavily in May and June, and then intermittently the rest of the season. Water this plant well during the growing season, mulch it in the winter, and cut it back after flowering to induce new foliage. It does best in full sun. (Zone 4)

*G. ibericum* reaches 18 to 24 inches in flower. The violet-colored, two-inch flowers appear in July and August on sticky stems that end in panicles. Leafstalks are long, with hairy, wide-lobed leaves. This is a vigorous, dense plant that forms mounds of foliage 10 to 18 inches tall. (Zone 3)

*G. macrorrhizum* grows up to 15 inches tall and 18 inches wide. It spreads by stolons and is an excellent ground cover. It has aromatic foliage with red fall color. It blooms early in May and does well in dry shade. Flowers are magenta-pink on terminal clusters above the seven-lobed hairy leaves. (Zone 3)

*G. pratense* is a clump-forming plant growing two feet tall and wide. The flowers are saucer-shaped, one-half inch wide, and are violet, blue, or white in color; they appear in early summer. The leaves are six inches long. This plant may need staking. (Zone 3)

*G. sanguineum* grows to 12 inches and spreads up to 18 inches. It is a hardy, good ground cover that is heat, drought, and shade tolerant. The one-inch bright pink flowers appear in summer. The plant has attractive lacy leaves. (Zone 3)

### Companion Plants

*Alchemilla mollis*  
*Campanula* species  
 Daylilies  
 Delphiniums  
*Dictamnus alba*  
*Digitalis* (foxglove)  
 Lupines  
 Ornamental grasses  
*Phlox paniculata*  
*Veronica spicata* with *G. endressii*



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