

Go all in on
summer

Alliums

Attractive, easy to grow, and pollinator friendly,
these perennials are worthy of a spot in your garden

BY RICHARD HAWKE

Some years ago, during a midsummer trip to Wisconsin, I found myself transfixed by a vast planting of 'Summer Beauty' allium dotted throughout with taller bright pink coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9). To my eyes, this perfect pairing of complementary colors but contrasting floral forms was simply brilliant, and the hum and dance of bees and butterflies brought it all to life. I think this was the moment when I truly came to appreciate alliums.

'Chivette'



» **At a glance**

Allium spp. and cvs.

Zones: 2–11

Conditions: Full sun;
well-drained soil

Native range:
Alpine regions of the
Northern Hemisphere

Propagation: Simple
division in spring or fall

Pests and diseases:
Occasional leaf spot,
mold, onion fly, thrips

Top-rated alliums



Summer Peek-a-Boo®



'Falling Stars'



'Windy City'

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Alliums, or ornamental onions, make up a diverse group of garden plants that includes spring-blooming bulbs, culinary herbs, and durable perennials with persistent foliage and bountiful summer flowers. Bulbous alliums—the ones with flowers as big as a kid’s head, or routinely photographed with one for size comparison—are marvels of the spring garden. Not all are big-bloomed or as tall as a toddler, but some—like the eye-popping purple balls of towering ‘Globemaster’ (*A. ‘Globemaster’*) or the 12-inch spidery pink globes of Schubert’s allium (*A. schubertii*) set a high bar. While these impressive flowers create garden drama, the dormancy that follows is less thrilling; the often outsized leaves can take what feels like months to die away, flopping over neighboring plants in the meantime and leaving gaping holes behind.

On the other hand, rhizomatous alliums—still bulbous but modified—act more like perennials, producing dense clumps of persistent grassy-to-straplike leaves that largely remain attractive to the last days of summer. Their individual flower heads—technically umbels—may be smaller but are more bountiful per plant than spring bloomers and extend the summer floral show into fall. And though gardeners love alliums in all their guises, bees and other pollinators are super fans! In fact, it is hard for me to think of alliums without the accompanying frenetic soundtrack of buzzing bees.

Our perennial allium trial at the Chicago Botanic Garden evolved organically from a simple comparison of ‘Summer Beauty’ to Summer Peek-a-Boo®, its compact doppelganger. I added ‘Millenium’ at the suggestion of a friend. While we were watching and ranking these initial alliums, others like them crept into the market and into our trials. I have a feeling this is just the beginning, but the following summer alliums have put on the most impressive show so far.

MAKE WAY FOR THESE HIGH-RANKING PERFORMERS

My initial reaction to chives in the trial was “No way,” but then ‘Chivette’ (photo pp. 34–35) showed up and “Why not?” seemed a better response. Chives fit handily into the popular foodscaping movement, and ‘Chivette’ is ornamental whether you eat it or not. Lavender-purple flowers, produced freely for about a month in late spring, become ragged looking near their end. ‘Chivette’ is mostly sterile, so there is no need to deadhead unless the browning flower heads disturb you. My suggestion is to take a deep breath, because a flush of bright

green leaves—curlier than the earlier leaves—about two weeks after flowering does a good job of covering any ugliness. A mid-season growth spurt widens ‘Chivette’ but does not add to its height. Yellow leaf tips were common but not bothersome; the ugly stage after flowering is mercifully short.

Summer Peek-a-Boo® (*A. ‘MGsmmpkb13’*) is a sport of ‘Summer Beauty’ that has a tidy compact habit with flowers perched on the foliage rather than rising above like its predecessor. The light purple flowers, in 2-inch spheres, smother the dark green strappy leaves for about a month in midsummer; minor leaf desiccation was noted periodically, but flowers masked the damaged tips. In our garden, the neat clumps were 18 inches tall and twice as wide. (I said it is compact, not dwarf!) To me, the two cultivars complement each other more than compete, although side by side, ‘Summer Beauty’ looks wilder. Summer Peek-a-Boo® is a versatile mixer; blousy calamint (*Calamintha nepeta* subsp. *nepeta*, Zones 5–9) softens its stout habit, while the vertical spikiness of Russian sage (*Salvia yangii* and cvs., Zones 4–9) is a wonderful contrast to its uniformity.

White-flowered ‘**Falling Stars**’ (*A. cernuum* ‘Falling Stars’) was a bit of a sleeper to me until it fruited. There is no doubt it is a pretty form of the typically pink-flowered nodding onion (*A. cernuum*)—a reference to the sharp crook that points the 2-inch flower clusters downward in a shower of stars in late summer. The purple-brown fruits are surprisingly attractive at their peak, but it is the yin and yang of the pure white flowers juxtaposed to the ripening dark fruits that captivates me. The gray-green leaves, thicker than those of the species, pale to light green with some tip damage as the season goes along. On my ornamental scale of 1 to 10, the grassy foliage lands in the middle. There is nothing wrong with it; I just find it less interesting than the deep greens of some other alliums.

Protruding white anthers add sparkle to the dark rose-purple umbels of ‘**Windy City**’, a standout feature of this 2015 introduction. The 2-inch starburst-like, mostly sterile flower heads open in early summer and put on a spectacular show for about six weeks. The glossy dark green foliage is particularly lush in the early season; leaf tips may yellow or brown in summer, although it was not too troubling. ‘Windy City’ has a uniform robust habit to 21 inches tall in bloom—while the leaves form a clump that is 10 inches tall and 30 inches wide. In my mind,

TRIAL PARAMETERS

The Chicago Botanic Garden has evaluated 20 select alliums since 2010. Besides observing their ornamental traits, we monitored the plants to see how well they grew and adapted to environmental and soil conditions, while keeping a close eye on any disease or pest problems and assessing plant injuries or losses over winter.

HOW LONG: Minimum three years

ZONE: 5b

CONDITIONS: Full sun; well-drained, alkaline, clay-loam soil

CARE: We provided minimal care, allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions.



Top-rated alliums

'Summer Beauty'

I always pair 'Windy City' with the softer habit of a grass such as 'Carousel' little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Carousel', Zones 3–9) and then imagine how its rosy flowers and purplish fruits blend with the red-purple, pink, and copper tones in the grass stems.



'Millenium'

'**Summer Beauty**' (*A. tanguticum* 'Summer Beauty') was developed in the Chicago area but quickly found fans farther afield. Lilac-pink flowers, in 2-inch globes, are plentiful in midsummer, drawing in pollinators of all stripes for about a month. The glossy, deep green leaves remain freshly verdant from spring to fall, forming bushy mounds with wiry flower scapes that rise 8 to 12 inches above the foliage. Leave the sterile fruits intact for seasonal interest; the winter skeletons are delightful etched in frost or dusted in a snowy mantle.

'**Millenium**' is the standard by which other alliums are judged; its popularity has grown steadily since it was introduced at the turn of this century. (The misspelling is regrettably intentional.) Each rosy purple flower head, like a plump lollipop, tops a sturdy stem to 20 inches tall. Taken all together, the pas-sel of nearly 2-inch spheres—dozens densely packed on every plant—is a fabulous midsummer spectacle. Dark green strappy leaves, bunched in generous clumps, are handsome and healthy throughout the summer and fall even as flower scapes turn brown. The botanical architecture of the flower—reminiscent of Bertioia's sunburst sculpture—takes on another dimension when the tan fruit capsules split late in the year. Enjoy the full floral show without worrying about unwanted seedlings, because 'Millenium' is essentially sterile. It is also proving to be cold hardy to boot. I have read reports of 'Millenium'—commonly listed for Zone 5—growing well in Zone 3 gardens in Canada.

Photo this page, top: millettephotomedia.com. Photo facing page, top right: Bill Johnson.

Noteworthy new kids

Although too new to our trial to be fully evaluated, these notable alliums are worthy of praise. Keep an eye out for them when you're at your local garden center or browsing your favorite online nurseries.



Being a sport of 'Millenium' naturally raises the expectations for 'Serendipity'—I know all you middle children can relate—but 'Serendipity' stands firmly on its own merits. The vibrant, rosy purple flowers almost glow at their midsummer climax. As with 'Big Beauty', we enjoy the show just before the buds pop as much as the flowers at peak, but unlike 'Big Beauty', all the flowers seem to open at the same time in a shorter period. The 2½-inch flower heads are slightly larger than those of 'Millenium', and the attractive foliage is blue-green rather than dark green. 'Serendipity' has an attractive, uniform upright habit; a smattering of yellow leaves after flowering is not too distracting.

Pretty much everything about **Texas allium** (*A. texanum*) was a surprise. At 3½ inches wide, the creamy white to pale yellow pom-poms were the largest in the trial and showy for about a month in early summer. Even the individual starry flowers were bigger—5⁄8 inch, compared to the more typical ¼ inch of other alliums. The clumps of twisting leaves are a bit loose, but the naked flower scapes stand tall at 24 inches. Texas allium cannot be compared to 'Millenium' or others of its kind, because the blue-gray leaves go dormant after flowering. As a design point, make it an accent among grasses and perennials that will cover the bare bases rather than massing it. New tufts of blue leaves sprout late in fall after the flower scapes have withered. This plant is native to wet areas, roadsides, and lowlands in Texas and Oklahoma, and although it likes a moisture-rich soil, it is drought tolerant too. Those conditions sum up our test site perfectly, so there is no surprise it is happy here!



We have been fans of 'Big Beauty' for a few years, although it was only officially introduced in 2021; the breeder let us preview it early. At the start of summer, scores of 3-inch globes open progressively over nearly two months. This extended flower show (the longest in the trial) may not pack the color punch of other alliums with condensed bloom periods, but the soft pink flowers are plentiful and pretty at every stage—and, notably, they sustain pollinators longer. The moments just before the plump silvery pink buds burst is as satisfying as the fully open flowers; in bud, the flower head is more open, which showcases its internal architecture beautifully. The wide, strappy, gray-green leaves stay healthy all summer on full bushy plants.



'Lavender Bubbles' is a newbie, with only one year in the trial—but what a year it was! One of the last to bloom, this allium has 3-inch dark purple bubbles that put on a fantastic show in late summer. The tendency is to compare all alliums to 'Millenium', and I get that, so 'Lavender Bubbles' blooms later and is darker purple. The twisty blue-green leaves are handsome with or without flowers, and as scapes grow above the foliage, their crooked tips gradually straighten out by the time flower heads open. Plants were small when first planted in spring, but 'Lavender Bubbles' was an overachiever, reaching 19 inches tall and 26 inches wide in its first season. I think it is a safe bet that 'Lavender Bubbles' will only get better in its second year.



The secret to summer allium success

When given proper conditions and care, summer alliums are stellar, reliable performers in the landscape. Here are some insights into these perennials that can help you manage and enjoy them to the fullest.

- **LOCATION.** While there are woodland species, these summer-blooming alliums are best grown in full sun and average to fertile well-drained soil. Avoid heavy clay and soggy conditions. These plants are drought tolerant once established.
- **PLANTING.** The summer alliums featured here are generally sold as rhizomatous plants. You will find them potted in nurseries in spring, and they can be planted much the same as any other perennial.
- **PRUNING.** Alliums make excellent cut flowers for fresh and dried floral arrangements. Beyond that, deadhead as desired. Persistent fruits can be ornamental in the garden late in the year, and while some hybrids are sterile, reseeding is a real issue for other alliums. If desired, scraggly foliage can be cut back after flowering to encourage a fresh surge of growth. Otherwise, cut faded dormant leaves back to the ground during fall cleanup.
- **PESTS AND DISEASES.** Alliums are rarely troubled by pests and diseases. High soil moisture, however, can lead to rot, mildew, and fungal leaf spots and molds. Plants are occasionally susceptible to onion fly and thrips.

ANATOMY OF A SUMMER ALLIUM

- 1. Umbel inflorescence**
A flower is comprised of a cluster of stalks that radiate from a central point.
- 2. Simple basal leaf arrangement**
The cylindrical linear leaves grow only from the base of the plant in a rosulate or whirled configuration.
- 3. Bulbous rhizomatous root system**
Vestigial bulbs are connected to rhizome root structures.

BLOOM UP-CLOSE

Single flower:

Allium umbel flower heads are made up of many small, individual single flowers.

Fruit: After pollination, each single allium flower turns into a small fruit or seed capsule, which often provides additional ornamental interest.

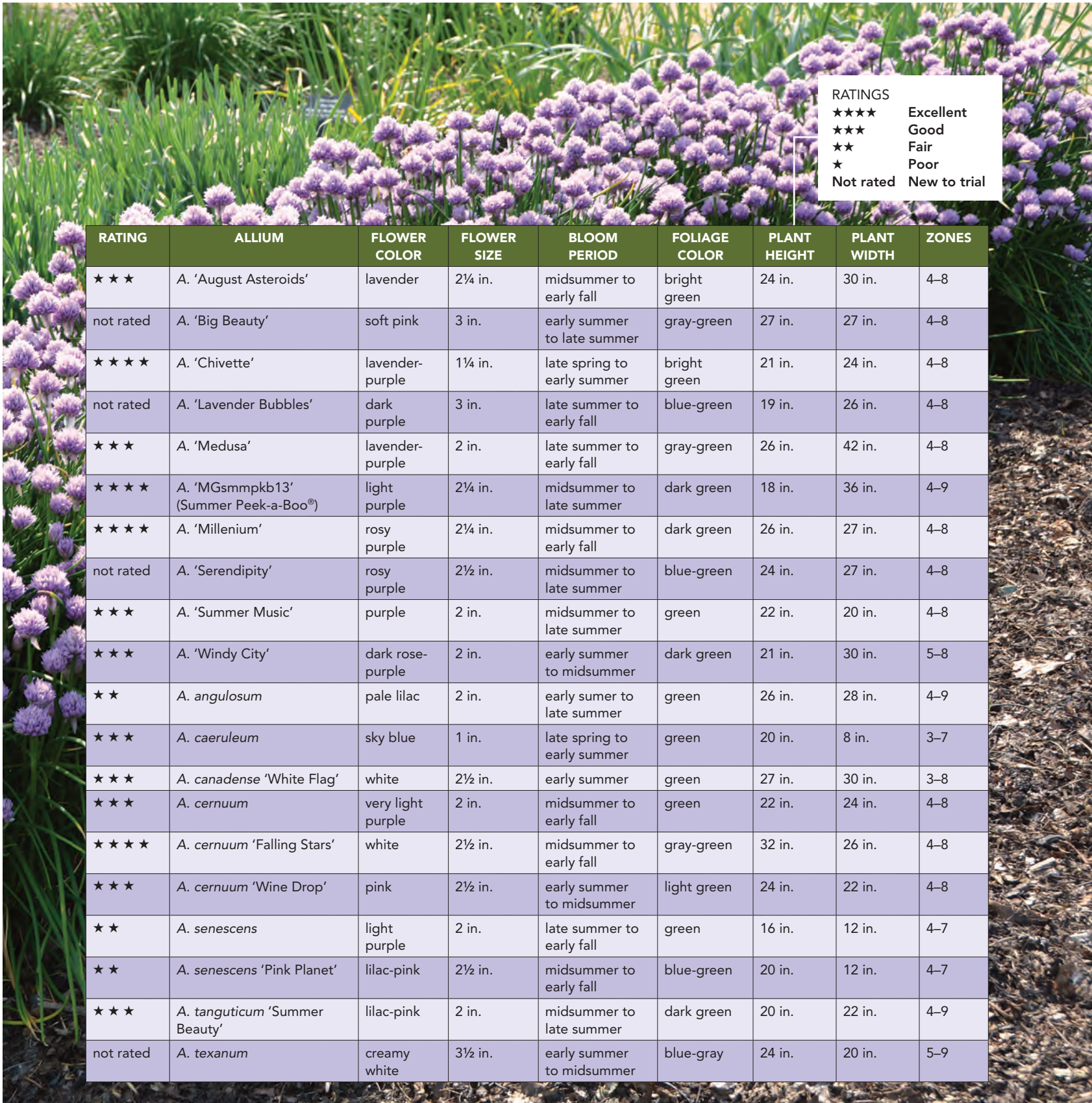
Seed: Within each fruit the tiny black seeds are revealed as the fruit dries and splits.



DIVIDING

- **DIVIDING.** To make more plants, manage overgrown clumps, or rejuvenate tired alliums, divide plants in early spring. These plants are pretty forgiving; you can also divide them after flowering in late summer or early fall if you do not mind them looking a little rough for the remainder of the gardening season.
- **WILDLIFE.** Bees and butterflies are tireless visitors when alliums are flowering. Their foliage—pungently aromatic when bruised or broken—deters most rabbits and deer from munching.

Photo this page: Stephanie Fagan. Illustrations: Jessica Daigle.



RATINGS
 ★★★★★ Excellent
 ★★★★ Good
 ★★★ Fair
 ★ Poor
 Not rated New to trial

RATING	ALLIUM	FLOWER COLOR	FLOWER SIZE	BLOOM PERIOD	FOLIAGE COLOR	PLANT HEIGHT	PLANT WIDTH	ZONES
★★★	A. 'August Asteroids'	lavender	2¼ in.	midsummer to early fall	bright green	24 in.	30 in.	4-8
not rated	A. 'Big Beauty'	soft pink	3 in.	early summer to late summer	gray-green	27 in.	27 in.	4-8
★★★★	A. 'Chivette'	lavender-purple	1¼ in.	late spring to early summer	bright green	21 in.	24 in.	4-8
not rated	A. 'Lavender Bubbles'	dark purple	3 in.	late summer to early fall	blue-green	19 in.	26 in.	4-8
★★★	A. 'Medusa'	lavender-purple	2 in.	late summer to early fall	gray-green	26 in.	42 in.	4-8
★★★★	A. 'MGsmmpkb13' (Summer Peek-a-Boo®)	light purple	2¼ in.	midsummer to late summer	dark green	18 in.	36 in.	4-9
★★★★	A. 'Millenium'	rosy purple	2¼ in.	midsummer to early fall	dark green	26 in.	27 in.	4-8
not rated	A. 'Serendipity'	rosy purple	2½ in.	midsummer to late summer	blue-green	24 in.	27 in.	4-8
★★★	A. 'Summer Music'	purple	2 in.	midsummer to late summer	green	22 in.	20 in.	4-8
★★★	A. 'Windy City'	dark rose-purple	2 in.	early summer to midsummer	dark green	21 in.	30 in.	5-8
★★	A. <i>angulosum</i>	pale lilac	2 in.	early summer to late summer	green	26 in.	28 in.	4-9
★★★	A. <i>caeruleum</i>	sky blue	1 in.	late spring to early summer	green	20 in.	8 in.	3-7
★★★	A. <i>canadense</i> 'White Flag'	white	2½ in.	early summer	green	27 in.	30 in.	3-8
★★★	A. <i>cernuum</i>	very light purple	2 in.	midsummer to early fall	green	22 in.	24 in.	4-8
★★★★	A. <i>cernuum</i> 'Falling Stars'	white	2½ in.	midsummer to early fall	gray-green	32 in.	26 in.	4-8
★★★	A. <i>cernuum</i> 'Wine Drop'	pink	2½ in.	early summer to midsummer	light green	24 in.	22 in.	4-8
★★	A. <i>senescens</i>	light purple	2 in.	late summer to early fall	green	16 in.	12 in.	4-7
★★	A. <i>senescens</i> 'Pink Planet'	lilac-pink	2½ in.	midsummer to early fall	blue-green	20 in.	12 in.	4-7
★★★	A. <i>tanguticum</i> 'Summer Beauty'	lilac-pink	2 in.	midsummer to late summer	dark green	20 in.	22 in.	4-9
not rated	A. <i>texanum</i>	creamy white	3½ in.	early summer to midsummer	blue-gray	24 in.	20 in.	5-9

POTENTIAL SOURCES

- **Bluestone Perennials**, Madison, OH; 800-852-5243; bluestoneperennials.com
- **Brent and Becky's Bulbs**, Gloucester, VA; 877-661-2852; brentandbeckysbulbs.com
- **Romence Gardens and Greenhouses**, Grand Rapids, MI; 888-907-5268; romencegardens.com
- **White Flower Farm**, Litchfield, CT; 800-503-9624; whiteflowerfarm.com

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Photo this page: Stephanie Fagan. Illustrations: Jessica Daigle.