

Go forth and multiply

Stick to quantity rather than variety when it comes to bulbs, says Chelsea winner Tom Stuart-Smith. Here he revels in spring's scillas and picks his top summer performers

If I were to relive my last 20 gardening years, one thing I'd do from the start would be to plant more bulbs. For years I was so obsessed by how the garden flourished in summer that I turned a bit of a blind eye to spring. All that time, if I had invested early, those bulbs would have been doubling and redoubling. Only later did I realise that the spring garden, more than any other, requires long-term thinking.

The twin bulbous glories of March are the early narcissi and the array of little blue scillas and their cousins from places such as the Balkans, Turkey and the Caucasus, which seem like handfuls of sky sprinkled through the garden.

Like many gardeners, there is a side of me that wants to collect every promising little beauty I see in the centrefolds of bulb catalogues, but then my restraining self cries out to hold back and by and large I stick to quantity rather than too much variety. So every year we plant as many *Scilla siberica* 'Spring Beauty' as I think we can afford and have the patience to plant, with the idea that in time we can float through March on an azure sea, which has in its turn taken over from drift clouds of snowdrops. *S. siberica* has hanging flowers of a supernormal blue. *S. bifolia* is a little paler, with the flowers facing outwards, and is possibly a better naturaliser. At Hergest Croft in Herefordshire, it is found in great drifts like a medieval enamelled

lawn. The scillas flower at the same time and are a similar colour to the darker pulmonarias such as 'Blauers Meer' and 'Blue Ensign', so while the bulbs bring blue into the sunnier places, the pulmonarias do the same for the damper bosky nook - the two combining in a blue-pronged pincer movement on our colour-deprived late-winter state.

For a paler, more violet blue with streaks of white and a less electric jolt into spring, *Chionodoxa luciliae* is equally thrifty and on good soils will seed itself about. The slightly variegated colouring perhaps makes it an even better accompaniment than the scillas to all the different sorts of hellebores that are flowering now. I like to mix chionodoxas in with the dark red, purple and green forms of *Helleborus orientalis*.

Paler still and verging on ice cool is *Puschkinia scilloides* from stony meadows in the Caucasus. This is a really stout little number lasting well in flower and contrasting beautifully with the darker blues.

All these I would plant in natural-looking drifts as big as I could manage on any ordinary soil, in flowerbeds that are later going to be full of perennials, or through grass where it isn't too dense and strong, but not too shady, either. Imagine the pattern you might get dropping propaganda leaflets over Cricklewood from 1,000ft in a light breeze.

Through my gradually thickening blue sea of scillas, I have planted cream and white narcissi. Not that I have anything against the EU, but





True blue: *Scilla siberica* 'Spring Beauty' (left). Plant *Eucomis bicolor* (below, top), *Lilium* 'Black Beauty' (middle) and *Crinum x powellii alba* (bottom) now for summer colour

little blasts of yellow set in a blue ground don't do it for me. I keep the bright yellows to one side where they can show off together. Perhaps the tallest of these is 'Peeping Tom', a golden aristocrat with great finesse and not some little snooper as the name suggests. At the other end of the spectrum in size and price is *N. cyclamineus*, short darts of gold with petals held back like a dive-bomber. In the catalogue in front of me it is listed at £5 a bulb - ouch.

My parents used to grow a few daffodils commercially, and the odd flower of *N. 'Texas'* - a double mish-mash of orange and yellow that looks as if it has been in a punch-up on a Saturday night - can occasionally be spotted in their garden. Not exactly childhood trauma, I admit, but enough to make me want to steer clear and opt for a succession of the virginally pure daffodils that seem to have come to us direct from Mount Olympus. March begins with 'Jenny', which does have a lemon-yellow cup (the bit in the middle) but pales just fast enough to cream. This is followed by 'Thalia', 'WP Milner' and 'Tresamble', all with creamy poise, delicacy and substance. The white parade ends in early May with *N. poeticus* var *recurvus*, the true pheasant eye and one of the most delicate and thrifty of the lot.

MISSED OUT ON BULB-PLANTING LAST AUTUMN?

If so, get these in the ground now...
Lilium 'Black Beauty'

A spectacular speciosum hybrid growing to 5ft in my garden with hanging flowers of deep cherry red and white. If it weren't for the dreaded but beautiful lily beetle, I'd grow loads of this. As it is, I keep them in a pot of good compost and crush the little bastards (the beetles that is) between my fingers



when they appear - which they do without fail. Poison does the job, too, if you like that sort of thing. Moist soil, sun or semi-shade.

Galtonia candicans For well-drained soils in sun, a supremely elegant summer hyacinth, 2-3ft high in July and August. Plant through low ground cover such as low sprawling geraniums or alchemilla.

Nerine bowdenii I would grow these somewhere warm and sunny, and keep for cutting in late October and early November - a final shot in the arm before winter gloom sets in.

Crinum x powellii alba The pink crinum is wonderful, the white even better and one of the most beautiful flowers of late summer. The bulbs swell to the size of a small football. This has the sort of decadent beauty of which Oscar Wilde would have approved. Leaves strap-like and untidy but forgivable. Full sun.

Eucomis bicolor I like to grow this in a pot but downwind as the flowers have a terrible stench of fetid underclothes (and worse). Fed well, the flowers and fresh seedheads are a green firework of great subtlety with exotic marblings up the stem. It's the easiest and cheapest eucomis and my favourite.

Full sun.

SUMMER BULB OFFER

Buy 5 *Lilium* 'Black Beauty', 5 *Galtonia candicans*, 5 *Nerine bowdenii*, 1 *Crinum x powellii alba* - or 5 *Eucomis bicolor* bulbs for £8.95 per variety (inc UK p&p), or buy a collection (1 *Lilium* 'Black Beauty', 6 *Galtonia candicans*, 6 *Nerine bowdenii*, 1 *Crinum x powellii alba* and 1 *Eucomis bicolor*) for £17.95. Call 0330 333 6851, quoting ref GUOB045. Delivery within 28 days.

Next week: Carol Klein on the art of sowing seeds.