

## Heleniums: Brides of the Sun

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In Germany they call Heleniums “Sonnenbraut” - “Sun Brides”, far more romantic and inspiring than the American “Sneezeweed” and most apt for these glowing flowers that love a sunny spot. We have just been granted National Plant Collection status for our Helenium cultivars. A gardening friend asked “why Heleniums?” As we have over 90 types now, I suppose this needs an answer.

We first bought a couple of Heleniums in the 1990’s - Moerheim Beauty and Butterpat - from a little local nursery in the West Midlands. The largish daisy flowers were attractive and we’ve always liked bright colours in the garden. But attraction really turned to love the following year when we found that we could split each plant into about twenty little rosettes and these proved stunning planted in a large drift. We were hooked. We quickly learnt not to divide them in autumn after losing the orange “Indianersommer”. Thankfully they love our free-draining soil in winter and cope with (but not love) its dryness in summer; these days every drop of our home made compost goes on the Heleniums. Being drained and quickly depleted of food Heleniums don’t grow over tall for us, the giants being Gartensonne a 5-6ft yellow and Tresahor Red and 6ft pure scarlet. But there are Heleniums in every height between 1ft and 7ft.

For some reason some people say they can’t be doing with staking tall flowers but I can’t see the problem - stick a cane in the ground, either tie in the plant or corral several in a ring of string, job done. If you really hate staking and want tall plants avoid seed grown ones (often labelled as “Red and Gold” or “autumnale”) and choose instead some robust, well-bred cultivars like “Fiesta” (Red and Orange), “Can Can” (Apricot and Orange), “Patsy” (Yellow with Red flecks). No need to bother with the Chelsea Chop (unless you want to take cuttings at this time) because most Heleniums rebloom if deadheaded. This can be done a flower at a time (if you’ve time to spare) or using shears across the tops of the plants taking about 3-4” off the tops.

Or why not choose some of the dwarf varieties. “The Bishop” (Yellow) was introduced in 1935 and flowers early (from early June) and keeps to less than 2ft tall. Some people have some problems with getting this to flower - try the newer “Pipsqueak” instead, this one flowers for longer and looks almost identical. The dwarf reds are stunning at the front of the border - choose from “Rubinzweg” (Ruby Dwarf), “Meranti”, “Vivace” or “Red Army”. A new dwarf is “Ruby Thuesday” (not its not a typo) - black red at first, maturing to deep red - take care to select plants of this one carefully, we’ve seen a lot of poor stock in garden centres. Another new dwarf is Bob Brown’s “Jam Tarts” - small red flowers with pastry yellow edge - don’t pinch this one out it’s almost too bushy in the first place.

So in the collection we have varieties ranging from 1ft to 6ft and flowering from June to November.

Heleniums are often used planted amongst late flowering grasses like Miscanthus, Molinia and Panicum where the tall varieties like the orange Riverton Gem or Chipperfield Orange look particularly fine. To catch the mood of the grasses dancing in the breeze, choose the modern Heleniums with upswept petals that often have contrasting colours on their reverse creating wonderful effects when viewed at near eye level in the breeze. Good ones include Rauchtopas, Ragamuffin and Moth. Add contrasting flower shapes like Achillea Forncett Fletton, Monarda Gardenview Scarlet and Salvia transsylvanica to complete the effect.

Our love is for smaller drifts of Heleniums planted in the more traditional herbaceous border. Tall at the back - choose a stout variety like Goldrausch or Gartensonne and partner with Rudbeckia, Helianthus and coloured leaved shrubs like Physocarpus Diablo or Berberis. For the middle layer long flowering varieties with wide heads of bloom include Hartmut Reiger, Flammendes Käthchen, or Marion Nickig. Add the sapphire blue Salvia uliginosa for a sparkling contrast with yellow varieties like Kanaria. Whisper it, but we love

growing mid height Heleniums against a backdrop of the much derided Lonicera Baggesen's Gold. We find Heleniums work well in association with daisy flowers like Rudbeckia, Gaillardia, Coreopsis and Cephalaria, but its also wise to have contrasting flower shapes bordering a large patch - we love especially Achillea Red Velvet with Helenium Rubinzweg; Alstroemeria Orange Glory with Kupfersprudel; Salvia x.superba with Goldene Jugend and Hemerocallis like Stafford with Red Jewel.

If you want a really stunning show and like Christopher Lloyd you don't mind flouting the rules of the colour wheel, try planting Heleniums with border Phlox following the German style of planting. Not for the faint hearted the vibrant pinks fight for attention against the glowing warm colours of the Helenium. Other equally bold associations include Helenium Moerheim Beauty with Lythrum Dropmore Purple (although the Helenium won't like the winter wetness) and the vermilion red Vivace with the pale pink Centaurea woronowii.

"Why Heleniums?" Who could refuse a place in the garden to the Brides of the Sun?

Janet & Martin Blow garden at Yew Tree House, Hall Lane, Hankelow, Cheshire CW3 0JB, where they also run their small nursery SpecialPerennials.com and hold the National Plant Collection of Helenium Cultivars. Their garden is open for the National Garden Scheme on 6,7, 20, 21 June; 4,5 July; 8,9,22,23 August; 19,20 September. Special collection open days are 2, 16 August. Lots of pictures of the collection and garden can be found on their website [www.specialperennials.com](http://www.specialperennials.com). For more information visit the website or phone 01270 811443.