

# There's something very Special in store

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Garden writer



► Living's horticulture expert, who gardens in Kennett, discovers why perennials are proving so popular

**T**HE world of ornamental plants has many enthusiasts who grow a particular genus or group of plants, and the keenest become National Collection holders.

One such couple is Martin and Janet Blow, who maintain both the National Collections of *Helenium* and *Centaurea*. They have more than 100 *Helenium* cultivars growing at their Hankelow, Cheshire, garden nursery. Their enterprise is aptly called Special Perennials ([specialperennials.com](http://specialperennials.com)) and offers a wide range of these increasingly popular perennials by mail order, at plant fairs and occasional open days.

*Heleniums* originate in areas of moist meadow soil. When I asked Martin for his advice on growing *heleniums*, he immediately said: "Don't let them go thirsty!" While they benefit from a moisture-retentive soil and the incorporation of well-rotted garden compost, there is no need to dig this in deeply as they are shallow and wide-rooted.

He also told me it is important to give them as much sun as possible. He and Janet have planted some in light shade and while they were partly successful with yellow and apricot-coloured varieties, the reds do not colour at all well. His third tip for success is to divide them every three years to help to maintain vigour. This is fairly easy, as some types will almost fall apart into separate sections on lifting, while others have to be carefully broken apart, taking care not to damage new shoots.

It is perfectly possible to have *heleniums* flowering in borders from June right through until early November. They have the added advantage of being virtually pest and disease-free. Slugs and snails may cause some damage to young foliage, but the plants generally recover.

Martin warns that while *heleniums* are toxic to grazing animals and therefore virtually never eaten by rabbits or deer, they are also poisonous to humans if eaten and may cause skin irritation in some people. He suggests washing hands after touching them.

Special Perennials offers a fine range of *heleniums* in a range of heights, so there is at least one which is right for every sunny garden. One of the oldest is *Wyndley*, which was introduced in 1921, and is capable of producing its rich yellow blooms from late June to November; it grows to around 30in high. *Fata Morgana* is a little taller at 36in while its upswept apricot petals have orange undersides.

Recently introduced from the Netherlands are the compact growing *Hot Lava* and *Ruby Charm*. *Hot Lava* has orange-red flowers, *Ruby Charm* rich red blooms. Both flower freely from July onwards and are ideal for smaller gardens. If space allows, try the 5ft tall *Amber*, introduced to the UK in 2012, or the equally stately *Vicky*, which is a yellow and red picotee.



**COLOURFUL CHARACTERS:** Clockwise from top: *Helenium Ruby Charm* (Special Perennials); *Helenium Vicky* (Special Perennials); *Helenium Wyndley* (Special Perennials)

All images courtesy of Special Perennials

