

GARDEN NEWS

THE DEVIL OR THE WIFE OF THE KING OF GODS?

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A Christian myth claims that alliums were created from the footprint of the Devil as he left the Garden of Eden, while in North America a tribe in the Appalachian Mountains believe that spring arrives when the leaves of the alliums appear, and made a tonic from the plant, full of vitamins and minerals, to dispel winter ailments when there were no other greens during the cold and dreary months.

It is true that during the late winter and spring the leaves do cover the bare ground quickly, providing a fresh green backdrop to our vibrant tulip display in the High Border. Alliums are of course related to garlic and onions, and their leaves can be quite pungent, but surprisingly many cultivars have delicately-scented flowers which are used in expensive perfumes. We do not grow alliums for their medicinal or culinary use, but have introduced a variety of cultivars to bridge the 'green period' from mid-May to the end of June, which in the horticultural world is usually referred to as the 'June hole'. No great botanical skills are needed to achieve a six-week succession of alliums, it only involves staggering the early and late-flowering cultivars to ensure a lengthy season. 'Purple Sensation' is the first to bloom, which dominates the Chelsea Flower Show (and is a one-week wonder just like the show) but still worthwhile to grow *en masse* with 'Purple Rain' and *Allium jesdianum* to vary the height and size of the round purple heads. A good choice to continue the spectacle is to include the very regal 'Beau Regard' amongst them, which will hand the sceptre of colour and form to the mighty 'Globemaster' and 'Gladiator', which have flowers the size of footballs on strong stalks, standing a metre high above the soft colour and foliage of *Aquilegia chrysantha* and the stronger form of the wallflowers. Then as the perennials and dahlias begin to emerge there is another flush of alliums - the giant, *A. giganteum*, and the gnome, *A. christophii*, which is the lowest of them all but which boasts the largest flower structure, covered



with silver-mauve stars. As these great flower-heads set their seeds the allium succession is complete and they pass on the sceptre of summer to the asters, geraniums, heleniums and the later-flowering annuals.

I will leave it to you to judge if alliums are the work of the Devil or of Sachi – the wife of Indra, King of the Gods in Hindu mythology – who tried to sip the nectar of immortality, but could not digest it and expelled the liquid to the earth and from this the allium grew. From my point of view I like to think that we have brought a touch of immortality to this precious Garden.