

Scilla and Relatives for the Garden

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Fall need not mark the end of the growing season; in fact, it sometimes marks a new beginning. Now is the time to plant your spring-flowering bulbs! Many gardeners concentrate their efforts on the bold



Scilla siberica

spring bulbs like tulips, daffodils and hyacinths.

However, there are a host of

'minor' bulbs that can grace our spring gardens. This article will deal with the *Scilla* and their relatives. As it happens, their flowers are primarily blue, a colour not available among the tulips and daffodils, so they are indeed a needed addition to our spring gardens.

Most *Scilla* and relatives hail from the Mediterranean area and Asia Minor where they inhabit open meadows, woodlands and alpine slopes. In the garden, the vast majority are easy to cultivate as long as the soil is well-drained. Since many are quite vigorous, they also lend themselves to naturalizing. Full sun to part shade is best and the bulbs should be planted about 10cm deep. Always plant them in groups for the best impact.



S. bifolia 'Rosea'

The true squills, from the genus *Scilla*, contain about 30 species,

however we generally only a few in our gardens. By far the most popular is Siberian squill, *Scilla siberica* because it is perhaps the most prolific of all due to self-seeding with abandon. Plant a cluster of bulbs and you'll have a drift in a few years! The standard selection is 'Spring Beauty' with pendant, somewhat star-like, deep blue, scented flowers. There is also a white form called 'Alba'. Less common is *S. bifolia* with smaller, upward-facing, star-shaped flowers which are produced along a one-sided



Puschkinia scilloides

spike. Its blooms are violet-blue but both white-flowered ('Alba') and pink-flowered ('Rosea') cultivars exist. Also available is *S. tubergeniana* (however, misnamed in the trade, its real name is *S. mischtschenkoana* although, the trade name is slightly easier to pronounce and spell! This species is slower to multiply but each bulb will produce several flower stems with outward-facing, fragrant blooms which are white with pale blue stripes (essentially a *Puschkinia* on steroids!). Lebanon squill, *Puschkinia scilloides* (aka *P. libanotica*) is, from the species epithet, very *Scilla*-like. They produce a loose, conical cluster of pale blue flowers with darker blue stripes. All of

the above species are rated for zone 3 and will reach about 15cm in height.



Scilla campanulatus 'Rose Queen' (left) and *Brimeura amethystina* (right)

Once known as *Scilla*, but now placed in the genus *Hyacinthoides*, are the bluebells. We grow two main species; the English bluebell (*H. non-scripta*) and Spanish bluebell (*H. hispanica* aka *H. campanulatus*). Both grow to about 30cm with spikes of nodding, bell-shaped flowers. They bloom about a month later than the true squills. The English and Spanish bluebells look quite similar but the flowers of English bluebell are one-sided on the stems, while those of Spanish bluebells are arranged around the stems. English bluebells are typically blue but white and pink-flowered selections exist. The Spanish bluebells are probably more common in the North American trade and have three main selections: 'Blue Queen', 'Rose Queen' and 'White Lion'. Bluebells are rated for zone 3 and actually prefer soil that stays moist, even during the dormant season. Unlike the true squills, bluebells lack the protective skin that helps maintain bulb moisture during the dry dormant season.

Very closely related to the bluebells is *Brimeura amethystina*, commonly known as Spanish hyacinth. It is a smaller, daintier bluebell look-alike with white or blue bells. It is only rated to zone 5 and probably best purchased from specialist bulb

nurseries.

The other large group of blue-flowered spring bulbs is the glory-of-the-snow, *Chionodoxa*. However, in this group, their blue colour is lighter with violet tints, rather than the true blue of squills and bluebells. There are four



Chionodoxa forbesii

main species, all which are hopelessly confused in the trade. The standard species is called *C. lucilliae* but I have purchased this species only to end up, at different times, with the other three species which are *C. sardensis*, *C. forbesii* and *C. lochiaie*. So I now have all four species without even trying! So how do the species differ? Not by much! The true *C. lucilliae* has only 1-2 flowers per stem and are soft violet-blue with a small central white zone. *C. lochiaie* has 2-4 flowers per stem, are also soft violet-blue but lack the white 'eye'.

Most of the *Chionodoxa* in the trade are actually *C. forbesii*. This species has up to 12 flowers per stem, are bright blue with just the slightest violet tint and have a large distinct white 'eye'. There are also white-flowered ('Alba') and pink-flowered ('Pink Giant') selections. The last species, *C. sardensis*, also has bright blue flowers which are outward-facing (the others are more upward-facing), smaller in size and lack the central white 'eye'. All are rated to zone 3 and



Chionodoxa forbesii 'Alba'

are the earliest-blooming of the blue-flowered spring bulbs. Finally, to complete the picture, there is *X Chionoscilla allenii*, a natural hybrid between *Chionodoxa forbesii* and *Scilla bifolia*. The flowers are deep blue and tend to look more like the *Scilla* parent.

I hope this article will stimulate you to try growing this wonderful group of 'minor' spring bulbs. I cannot even imagine a spring garden without them.