

# Shine a Light

With their clear, bright blooms, geums will illuminate all manner of garden situations. **Val Bourne** gets recommendations from Sue Martin, holder of the National Plant Collection of geums, and owner of Brickwall Cottage Nursery in Kent

PHOTOGRAPHS SARAH CUTTLE



*Geum* 'Farncombe' grows on particularly long stems and offers flowers in a vividly sizzling shade of orange.



**S**ue Martin's quarter-of-an-acre cottage garden at her nursery in Kent has been home to her Plant Heritage collection of geums – more than one hundred different cultivars and varieties – since 2006. “I was first attracted by their clear colours and variety,” says Sue. “They flower at a very good time of the year, when the spring flowers have finished but the summer extravaganza is yet to get going. They grow in all sorts of conditions, from shade to semi-shade to sun, and they flower for a very long time.”

Sue moved here in 1988 when the garden was a completely blank canvas because the previous owner had grown only vegetables. “The soil was fantastic because the man who lived here also worked on the

**Above** Summer-flowering ‘Hilltop Beacon’ is influenced by Chilean species *Geum quellyon* and has petals in a lovely blend of pink, orange and yellow.

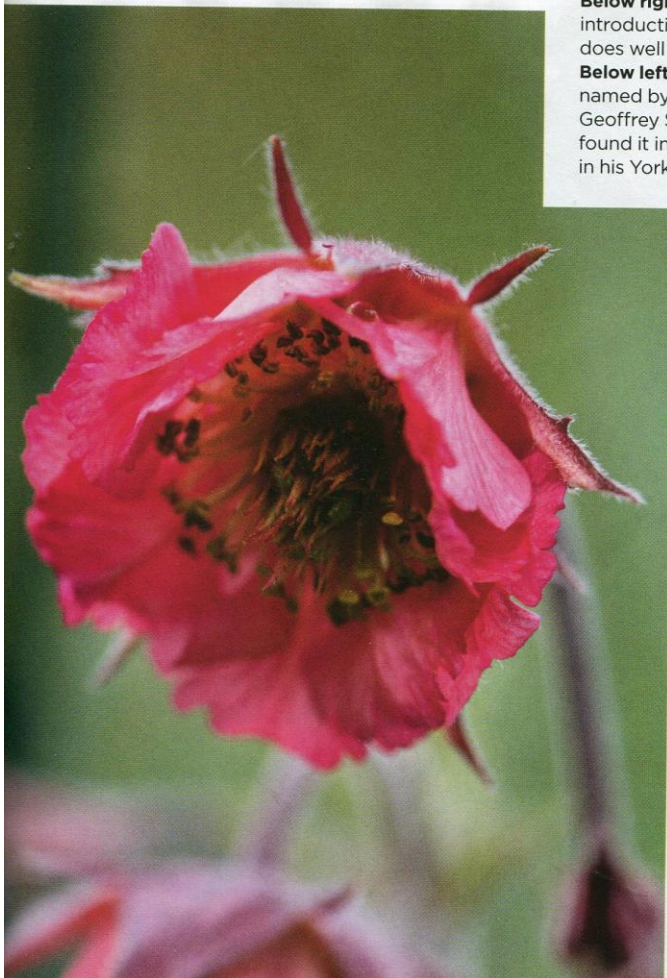
farm. When he limed and manured the fields, he did the garden as well.” They thrive on this heavy, fertile soil, but over the years Sue has also added tons of sharp grit to improve the drainage, because geums hate being waterlogged. “The worst thing for them, though, is free-draining soil that dries out,” she explains. There are four raised beds, originally made for vegetables, but they’re full of geums with not a vegetable to be seen. “I wouldn’t recommend raised beds though. They’re fine most of the time, but in a drought the plants suffer and I have to water them a lot.”

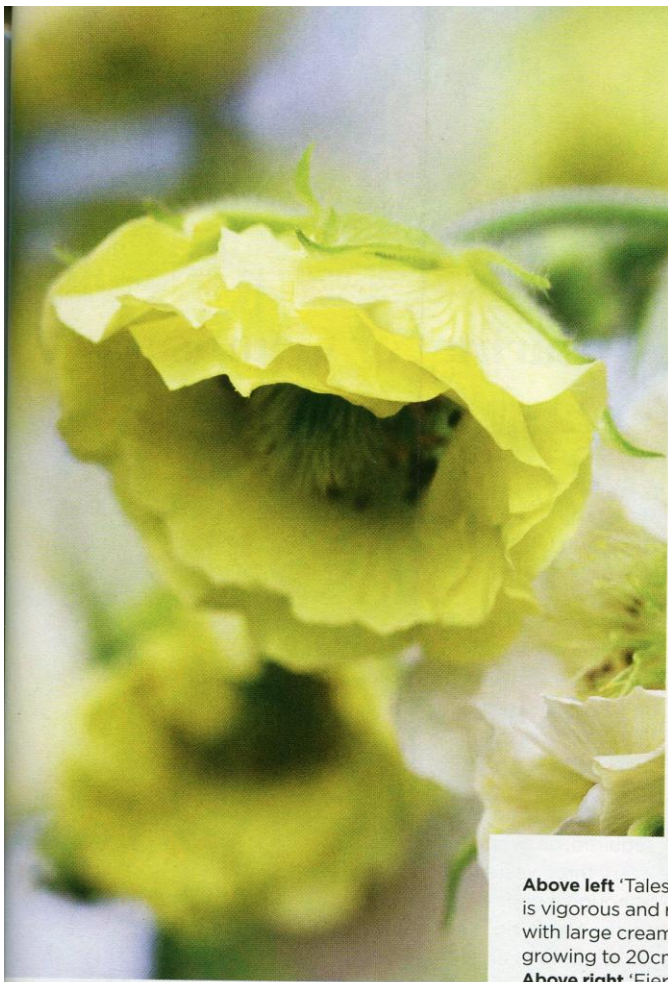
The shadier parts of Sue’s garden are perfect for *Geum rivale* cultivars. This woodlander is found naturally in shadier places in Europe and in northern parts of the UK. “They produce nodding flowers in white, shades of yellow, pink and pale-orange, through March, April and May,” says Sue. While she describes them as “understated”, they often have contrasting calices and stems in deep-red. “It’s best to deadhead these spring-flowering geums, to keep your plant true to type, because those with *G. rivale* blood often produce seedlings,” she advises. One of her favourites is 25cm tall *G. rivale* ‘Lemon Drops’, a woodland shade-lover found in Beth Chatto’s garden in Essex, with drooping heads of greenish-yellow buds that open to yellow. Deadhead it after flowering and try it near blues such as *Pulmonaria* ‘Blue Ensign’.

As spring slips into summer, brighter geums begin to appear in shades of orange and red. These are influenced by a Chilean species named *G. quellyon*, previously *G. chiloense*. When Sue’s garden opens in May, it’s these eye-catching plants that visitors love most. “They flower from April until July and they often have upward-facing double flowers in shades of orange and red. They come from Chiloé Island, off the coast of Chile, where the climate is wet and cool. ‘Hilltop Beacon’ is typical. It flowers for ever and ever and it’s a lovely blend of pink, orange and yellow – everyone who visits the garden remarks on it,” Sue enthuses. ‘Rubin’, meanwhile, raised by German nurseryman Georg Arends in 1938, is a good clear-red. Sue often combines these colourful geums with forget-me-nots.



**Above left** 'Lisanne' has wavy-edged blooms in a shade of soft yellow.  
**Above right** Clear red 'Rubin' was raised by German nurseryman Georg Arends in 1938.  
**Below right** Sue's own introduction, 'Dawn', does well in semi-shade.  
**Below left** 'Bell Bank', named by TV gardener Geoffrey Smith, who found it in a shady spot in his Yorkshire garden.





**Above left** 'Tales of Hex' is vigorous and resilient, with large creamy flowers growing to 20cm tall.

**Above right** 'Fiery Tempest' is a particularly rich shade of red.

**Below** Classic 'Totally Tangerine' holds an AGM and offers soft orange flowers on 60cm stems.



Geum flowers are very bee-friendly, so they tend to hybridise freely. 'Dawn' arrived as a seedling in Sue's garden in 2009, and she describes it as "a strong spreading plant with drooping double flowers. The petals are golden yellow inside and streaked with orange on the outside." 'Dawn' does well in semi-shade, flowering for eight weeks from early April until the end of May.

Lots of newly bred geums have appeared in recent years, so from 2018 until 2022 the RHS held an Award of Garden Merit trial of 130 geums at Harlow Carr in Yorkshire. Sue was part of the expert judging panel, but there were cultural problems that lead to many losses. 'Red Wings' and 'Rubin', both eminently AGM-worthy in Sue's opinion, didn't perform at all well. The large-flowered Cocktail Series, raised in America, also failed to perform, echoing Sue's experience with 'Mai Tai', which doesn't overwinter for her. 'Firestorm', raised by Terra Nova nursery in the USA, and 'Flames of Passion' raised by Piet Oudolf in Hummelo, his private Dutch garden, also failed to impress. The large-flowered Tempest Series, raised by Elizabeth MacGregor's Scottish nursery, fared better. Sue prefers 'Fiery Tempest' to 'Scarlet Tempest' for its redder colour.

But she's keen to emphasise that plenty of geums are perfectly hardy and reliable. For red flowers,



## GROWING ADVICE

## Caring for Geums

Give them the conditions they enjoy and your geums will thrive and spread

**Geums need soil** that is moist and fertile. They don't like dry, hot spots.

**Good drainage** is also essential, since many geums are derived from species found growing in woodland, on slopes, or on steep riverbanks.

**Regular division** is required, on average every three years, although it does depend on the plant. Dig them up in spring or early

autumn, and break them up into separate pieces, ensuring each piece has roots attached. Plant out straight away, discarding any weak pieces. Don't let your divisions dry out.

**Vine weevils** enjoy geums, so keep an eye out for flagging stems and bin any affected plants.

**Rabbits and slugs** tend not to be a problem, despite geums' appealing evergreen foliage.

70cm tall 'Red Wings' is a long-lived, reliably floriferous plant with large bright red flowers, and in Sue's opinion it should have been awarded an AGM. Semi-double, upward-facing flowers appear from April through until June.

For those seeking orange blooms, 'Totally Tangerine' AGM produces its 60cm tall wands of soft-orange flowers from May until late in the year, making it one of the longest-flowering geums of all. It was Plant of the Year at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2010. Well-known 'Prinses Juliana' AGM is a Dutch hybrid raised by W. van Veen of Leiden in 1923, popularised by the German nurseryman Georg Arends and introduced into Britain by Alan Bloom in 1940, standing the test of time ever since. A stunning, semi-double orange that gives a 14-week flowering season (although some of the later flowers tend to be single), at 60cm tall it's good with late, dark tulips such as 'Black Hero'. It's sterile, so there are no unwanted seedlings.

'Dolly North' is another old variety, raised by Amos Perry in the early 20th century. It has semi-double glowing orange flowers with a warm-yellow colourwash, and at 45cm tall it's good at the front of a border in a bright position that doesn't get too hot.

Sue's favourite pink geums include 'Bell Bank' AGM at 30-45cm tall, which has large, copper-pink,

**Above** 'Dolly North' is an old variety with glowing orange petals washed with warm yellow, and at just 45cm tall it's good at the front of a border.

semi-double flowers from early April until late May. At first the large, frilly flowers hang their heads demurely, but then they straighten up and fade to a paler shade of pink. 'Bell Bank' was named by the late television gardener Geoffrey Smith who found it growing in a damp and shady area of his garden at Kettleing in Yorkshire.

'Pink Petticoats' AGM is a recent, widely available geum admired for its frilly multi-petalled flowers in shades of coral-pink. While it's flamboyant in colour, the flowers are modestly sized and they hang their heads downwards from their 30cm tall stems.

In soft lemon yellow, 'Lisanne' AGM is covered with large, single, wavy-edged 30cm flowers from early May until June. It came from Dutch nurseryman Coen Jansen who was given the plant by a lady in his village and named it after her daughter.

Raised by Roger Proud of East of Eden Nursery in Cumbria, 'Tales of Hex' AGM is a strong 20cm plant with good foliage and large cream-white flowers from May until July. It flourishes in an inhospitable place in Sue's cottage garden. ■

## SUPPLIERS

**East of Eden Nursery**  
*east-of-eden-nursery.co.uk*

**Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants**  
*hardysplants.co.uk*

**Norwell Nurseries**  
*norwellnurseries.co.uk*

Brickwall Nursery, 1 Brickwall Cottages, Frittenden, Kent TN17 2DH. Opens for the National Garden Scheme on 5 and 6 May 2024, 2-5pm. Tel: 01580 852425; [geumcollection.co.uk](http://geumcollection.co.uk)