

# A nod to summer

Geums are loved for their charming, often vibrant blooms, and some early-flowering selections helpfully bridge the gap between spring and summer. National Plant Collection holder Sue Martin delves into their diversity

**WITH THEIR APPEALING** cup-shaped flowers in a range of colours, held atop slender yet wiry stems, geums are popular hardy perennials – their usually evergreen leaves and convenient, mid-sized stature make them useful garden plants. The genus *Geum*, part of the rose family, holds more than 50 species found in temperate regions of the world. The most showy selections are related to *G. chiloense*, which comes from the island of Chiloé off the coast of Chile, where it grows in open grassland and among rocks in damp soil. This species typically has double flowers of yellow, orange or red that grow to 60–80cm (24–32in) on stiff stems. These normally flower in summer and make fine border plants, while some other geums are usefully early flowering and suited to a range of garden uses.

## Demurely attractive

*Geum rivale* **1**, a UK native, grows wild in the north of the British Isles in damp places, often beside streams or on the edge of woods, which gives rise to its common name, water avens. Its drooping flowers are small but reward close examination: pale yellow petals are marked with orange-red streaks and deeper red veins, and enclosed by a dark red calyx (cup-like structure forming the base of the flower). The calyx is a prominent part of a geum flower and adds to its nodding, demure charm. The hairy stems and weed-suppressing evergreen leaves emerge from gently spreading woody rhizomes. After flowering, plants are topped by fluffy seedheads (known as achenes) that are an attraction in themselves.

This species is early flowering and the parent of a number of charming, more showy cultivars, all of which are useful in shade or semi-shade, flowering from early April until the beginning of June. While *Geum rivale* is suited to informal parts of the

## GEUM GALLERY

Boxed numbers in the text refer to the following *Geum* selections (photographed 6 May 2010 at Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants, Hampshire):

- 1 *Geum* 'Prince of Orange'
- 2 *G. rivale* 'Album'
- 3 *G.* 'Red Wings'
- 4 *G. rivale* 'Cream Drop'
- 5 *G.* 'Hannay's'
- 6 *G.* 'Marmalade'
- 7 *G.* 'Bell Bank'
- 8 *G.* 'Karlskaer'
- 9 *G. rivale*
- 10 *G.* 'Dolly North'
- 11 *G.* 'Pink Frills'
- 12 *G.* 'Mango'
- 13 *G.* 'Borisii'

RHS / TIM SANDALL WITH THANKS TO HARDY'S COTTAGE GARDEN PLANTS









## PLANTS PROFILE

garden, *G. rivale* 'Album' 2 has wider appeal, white being an unusual colour in geums. Although its flowers are small and the petals are almost completely enclosed by a green calyx, a clump covered with delicate nodding flowers is effective with more colourful plants. *Geum rivale* 'Snowflake', a new introduction, has larger white flowers.

Geums are extremely promiscuous and produce many varied seedlings. Noted Essex plantswoman Beth Chatto has named two found in her garden. As the name suggests, *G. 'Lemon Drops'* has lemon-yellow petals with green calyces, while delightful *G. 'Coppertone'* has petals that are copper-orange outside, red veined and yellow inside, surrounded by deep red calyces.

Another chance seedling, found at Herterton House Garden Nursery in Northumberland, is *G. 'Herterton Primrose'*. This has red calyces and deep yellow, vibrant petals, more prominent than those of *G. 'Lemon Drops'*.

### Showier selections

Many cultivars have been introduced with larger, brightly coloured flowers. These are especially useful for the front of borders where there is some shade. *Geum 'Marmalade'* 3, as its name suggests, has orange petals that show clearly below a bright red calyx. This provides a welcome contrast and adds excitement to the overall effect. *Geum rivale* 'Apricot' is similar but has slightly deeper orange petals. In *G. rivale* 'Cream Drop' 4 the contrast between its cream petals and dark red calyces and stems is stronger still – the plant really stands out when in full flower.

Introduced in 1923, *G. rivale* 'Leonard's Variety' has stood the test of time. Its drooping, deep coppery-pink flowers can be double or single on the same plant. As the flowers age they begin to open out and turn upwards.

Pink is an unusual colour in geums; *G. 'Pink Frills'* 11 is a pretty selection with overlapping, heart-shaped, frilly-edged petals contrasting with a red calyx; *G. 'Mrs W. Moore'* is similar.

Superb *Geum 'Bell Bank'* 7 has large double flowers with frilly-edged, coppery-pink petals. Raised by the late

## CARING FOR YOUR GEUMS

- Plant geums in good garden soil that does not dry out: plants die if starved of moisture; extra watering may be needed in hot, dry summers.
- The addition of organic matter such as garden compost when planting and an annual mulch will help retain moisture, but geums also like good drainage: add grit in heavy soils.
- Geums require little attention once established. They do not need staking: *G. rivale* cultivars (inset, right) reach only around 50cm (20in) high. Deadheading is not necessary and would deprive the gardener the bonus of seedheads. Repeat flowering can occur but usually there are only a few blooms.
- To keep plants growing well, divide every three to four years in spring before flowering, or once flowering is finished. Once rhizomes begin spreading from the centre of the plant, lift and replant healthy sections with good roots.
- Pests are seldom a problem; slugs seem to avoid geums, and while plants in pots can suffer vine weevil attack, geums planted in the ground are almost problem free.



RHS / CAROL SHEPPARD

Geoffrey Smith at Harlow Carr Gardens in the early 1980s, it is one of the most showy of the lower-growing, early-flowering geums and is a strong grower. Similar *G. 'Flames of Passion'* has flowers more intense in colour, but it does not appear to be so vigorous.

Promising recent selections include *Geum 'Hannay's'* 5 with prolific mid-orange, cup-shaped flowers that can be single or semi-double; there is also a truly double form. With tightly packed double flowers of bright red and pink petals with yellow on the reverse, *G. 'Mango'* 12 is also worth seeking out.

### Other earlier geums

From mountainous regions of the Balkans comes *Geum coccineum*; it is also usefully early flowering and produces bright orange, upward-facing, single flowers. Its cultivar *G. 'Borisii'* 13 is long established whereas *G. coccineum* 'Cooky' is a recent introduction, flowering prolifically from early May, adding brilliant colour to the garden for weeks. Pretty *G. 'Karlskaer'* 8 probably also has *G. coccineum* in its make-up, with golden-yellow flowers enlivened by darker orange tints in the centre.

Some selections related to *Geum chiloense* can start to flower in April and continue into summer. Examples include orange *G. 'Dolly North'* 10, *G. 'Red Wings'* 3 with bright red flowers, and aptly named *G. 'Prince of Orange'* 1.

### Planting partners

Early geums complement other early perennials such as *Pulmonaria*: good choices are *P. 'Blue Ensign'* with dark blue flowers and pale blue *P. 'Cotton Cool'* with silvery-green leaves. A scattering of bulbs such as scillas, narcissi, chionodoxas and tulip species among the lower-growing geums adds to the overall effect. The bright orange spiky leaves of *Libertia peregrinans* contrast well with the orange flowers of *G. coccineum* cultivars; and for an eye-catching combination, a mass of forget-me-nots with red- or orange-flowered *Geum chiloense* cultivars floating above is hard to beat. ■

Sue Martin holds a National Plant Collection of *Geum*: her garden opens under the National Gardens Scheme

**i Suppliers:** most plants from this article are available from nurseries listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2011–2012*

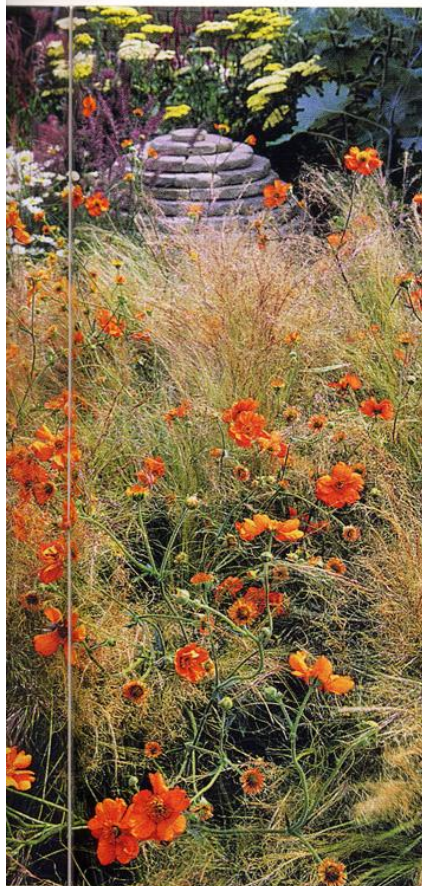
### National Plant Collections of Geum:

- Susan Martin, 1 Brickwall Cottages, Frittenden, Cranbrook, Kent TN17 2DH; 01580 852425; sue.martin@talktalk.net; www.geumcollection.co.uk. Open by appointment and on NGS open days: 3, 10, 17, 24 & 31 May (11am–4pm), 7 & 8 May (2–5.30pm) and 14 & 15 May (2–5.30pm)
- The Rt Hon The Lord Kenyon, Gredington, Whitchurch, Shropshire SY13 3DH; 01948 830305; lloyd@kenyonl.freemove.co.uk. Open by appointment

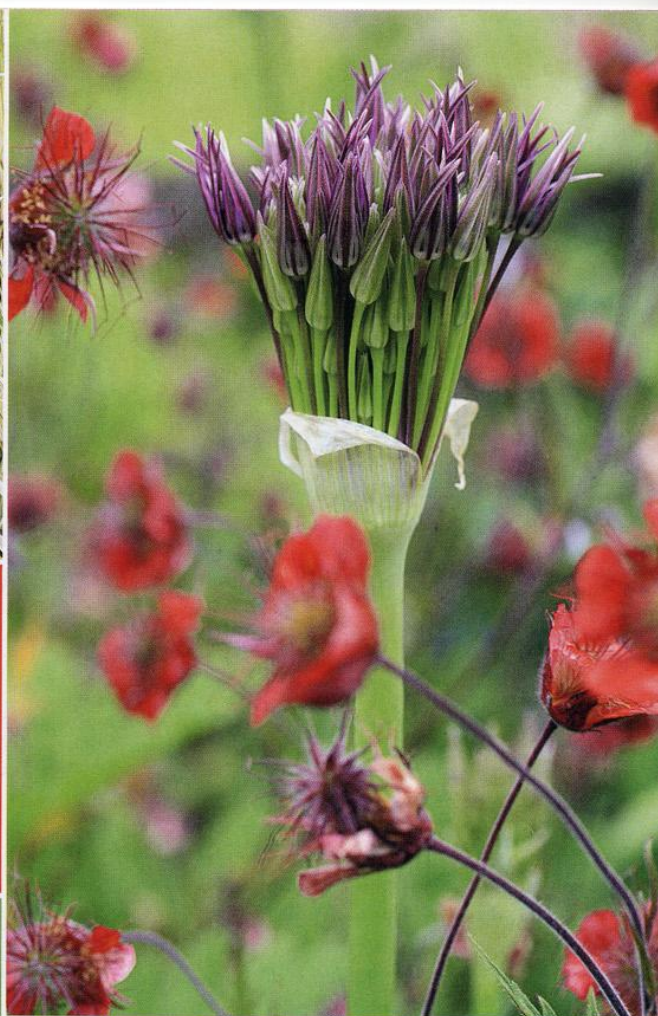
PHOTOGRAPHS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): JOHN GLOVER; GAP / NEIL HOLMES; GAP / MAXINE ADCOCK; GAP / LYNN KEDDIE; OTTO KALKHOVEN; GRI / ANDREA JONES







'A MASS OF FORGET-ME-NOTS WITH RED- OR ORANGE-FLOWERED *GEUM CHILOENSE* CULTIVARS FLOATING ABOVE IS HARD TO BEAT'



**GREGARIOUS GEUMS** (clockwise from top left) • Selections of *Geum chiloense* bloom into summer; try en masse with *Stipa tenuissima*. • Dazzling *G. 'Borisi'* makes a vibrant partner for a variegated grass. • *Geum rivale* 'Leonard's Variety' is useful; team its nodding blooms with *Allium cristophii*. • Delicate *G. 'Pink Frills'* goes well with a silver-leaved *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*. • Versatile *G. coccineum* shines from a sea of forget-me-nots. • *G. rivale* 'Leonard's Variety' and *Brunnera* create a similar effect