

We Love May

for showstoppers galore

This month, let us think of your garden as a circus. We have had those moments of anticipation where you arrive and shake off your umbrella (January), and shuffle in semi-darkness to your seat (February). Then your eyes slowly get used to the gloom (March) and start picking out little glossy details rising from the background – the glint of light upon a trumpet or the warm smell of an impatient horse backstage (April). Now we are here in glorious May, as the lights go up, the music begins and the ringmaster arrives full of bounce and swagger. Finally, the show can begin!

Words by James Alexander-Sinclair

STAR OF THE MONTH

Geum 'Mrs J. Bradshaw'

Let us continue with that circus analogy for a while with the arrival of those tutued acrobats that stand, perfectly balanced, on the backs of cantering horses. Here, as you gaze upon their delicately ruffled skirts and perfect pins, you would be forgiven for thinking that these slim stems could not support anything, but here is the proof. These are, of course, *Geum* 'Mrs J. Bradshaw', a descendant of a Chilean variety brought here in 1826 that, with assiduous deadheading, will flower all summer. She has a close friend, *Geum* 'Lady Stratheden', with gorgeous soft yellow petals. Both look amazing with *Stipa tenuissima*.

Best in a good fertile soil; if too dry they tend to get mildew. Comes true from seed sown in autumn and overwintered in a cold frame.

Height x Spread 60cm x 60cm

For more information on geums, please turn to p16

PHOTO: SARAH CUTTLE



ROLL UP, ROLL UP!

A gathering of stilt walkers dressed in purple tights or sunshine-yellow leotards. The flowers teeter on long stems – will they fall? Of course not, but the audience will enjoy a frisson of worry for a moment. As with all spindly plants like this, a bit of discreet staking will save much heartache.

***Lysimachia atropurpurea* 'Beaujolaie'**

Plant with lots of manure (or similar) and try not to let it dry out. Divide congested clumps in spring. **H x S** 60cm x 50cm

***Verbascum* 'Cotswold Queen'**

Needs full sun and good drainage. Short-lived, so expect it to last a couple of years, but will self-seed. Watch out for mullein moth caterpillars in summer. **H x S** 120cm x 30cm

STAR PERFORMER

Amid the excitement of the circus we need a moment of calm. There, caught in a single spotlight, is a gymnast high above doing graceful things to the sound of a lone piano. This is the ox-eye daisy, a wildflower that thrives in meadows, motorway embankments and railway sidings. But no matter what the surroundings, it will always grab the attention as something simple in an increasingly frantic world.

Leucanthemum vulgare

Sow seed into a well-prepared bed in autumn or spring. Will spread readily into sparse grass or bare soil. **H x S** 90cm x 60cm



PHOTOS: SARAH CUTTLE; JASON INGRAM



great for long-lasting colour

CRAZY GANG

In the immortal words of Stephen Sondheim, "Send in the clowns...", and here they are: a slightly mad tangle of colours, textures and flower shapes. They stop short of squirting water in your eye or flinging flans but they are guaranteed to make you smile. Add a nice green pot to calm the chaos.

***Salvia roemeriana* 'Hot Trumpets'**

A compact plant that will flower from now until September. Plant in free-draining soil, which will help it to survive winter. Take cuttings in late summer. **H x S** 30cm x 20cm

***Euphorbia amygdaloides* 'Craigieburn'**

A lovely contrast between leaves and flowers. Plant with grit to aid drainage. **H x S** 45cm x 45cm

***Imperata cylindrica* 'Rubra'**

Slow growing but worth the wait for its glorious blood-red leaves. Cut to the ground in February, then divide in spring. **H x S** 40cm x 30cm

ON PARADE

No longer a feature at the circus (thank goodness), but if we think back a few decades there would always be elephants. It may be a stretch to conjure up an image of a heavy-footed pachyderm when looking at this display, but half-close your eyes and you'll imagine distant trumpeting and questing trunks.

Iris setosa 'Baby Blue'

Best avoided if soil is very chalky. Propagate from seed in autumn or division in summer. Watch out for slugs and snails. **H x S** 20cm x 15cm

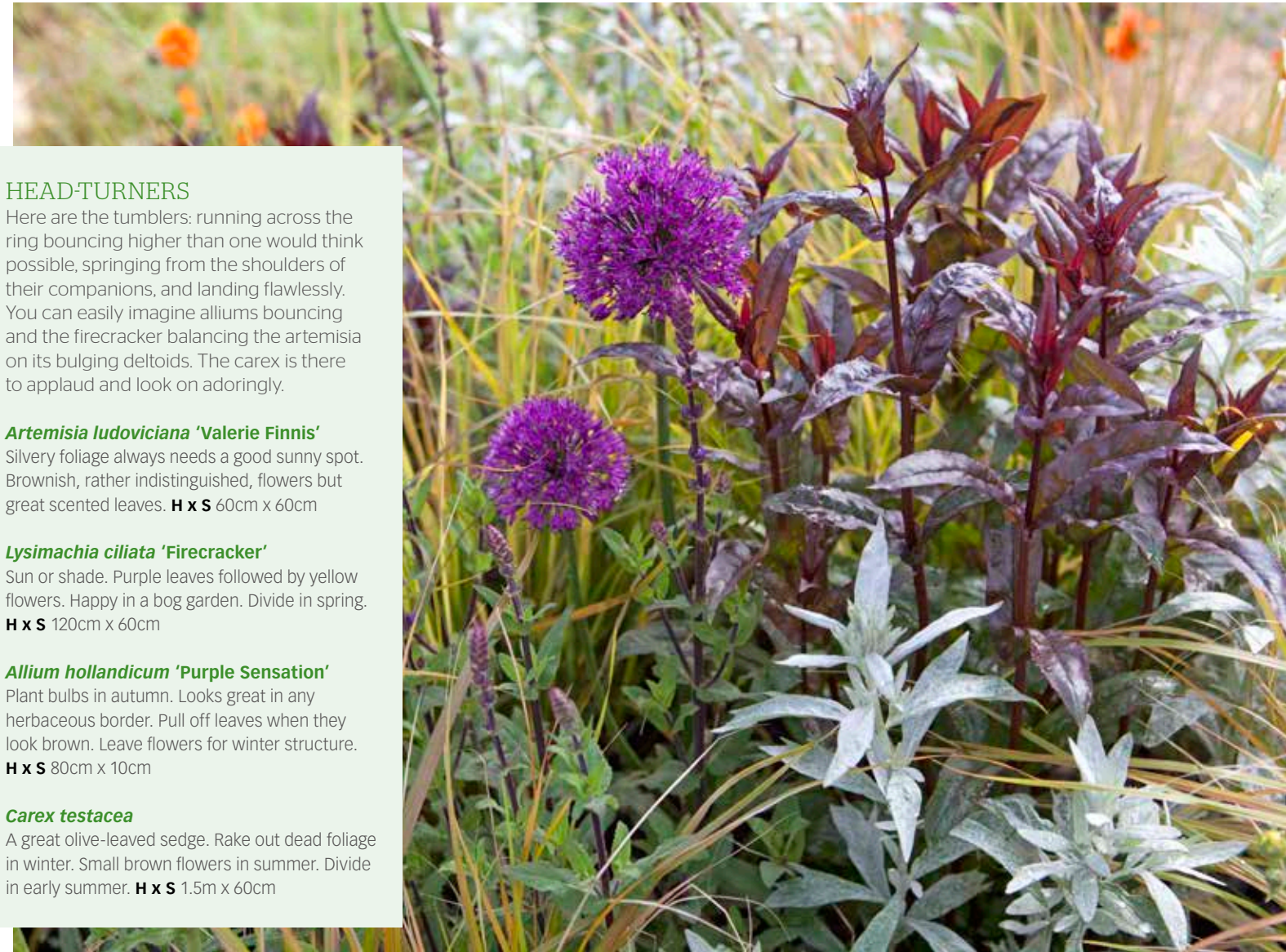
Scabiosa incisa 'Kudo'

Plant in full sun and they will flower all summer. Deadhead regularly. Perfect for bees and butterflies **H x S** 35cm x 30cm

Salvia nemorosa 'Ostfriesland'

Cut back immediately after flowering to get a second flush in late summer. Best in full sun. **H x S** 45cm x 60cm





HEAD-TURNERS

Here are the tumblers: running across the ring bouncing higher than one would think possible, springing from the shoulders of their companions, and landing flawlessly. You can easily imagine alliums bouncing and the firecracker balancing the artemisia on its bulging deltoids. The carex is there to applaud and look on adoringly.

Artemisia ludoviciana 'Valerie Finnis'

Silvery foliage always needs a good sunny spot. Brownish, rather indistinguished, flowers but great scented leaves. **H x S** 60cm x 60cm

Lysimachia ciliata 'Firecracker'

Sun or shade. Purple leaves followed by yellow flowers. Happy in a bog garden. Divide in spring. **H x S** 120cm x 60cm

Allium hollandicum 'Purple Sensation'

Plant bulbs in autumn. Looks great in any herbaceous border. Pull off leaves when they look brown. Leave flowers for winter structure. **H x S** 80cm x 10cm

Carex testacea

A great olive-leaved sedge. Rake out dead foliage in winter. Small brown flowers in summer. Divide in early summer. **H x S** 1.5m x 60cm



NO SHRINKING VIOLET

This is speedwell, so it needs to be the high-wire act, swinging and spinning through the air as speedy as a hummingbird. I know that, in reality, this is a bit of a ground-hugging, mat-forming plant, but we can all have dreams, can't we? Anyway, the colour is strikingly gorgeous and would be my chosen hue for a sparkly leotard.

Veronica prostrata

A semi-evergreen that needs full sun but doesn't mind wind or rain. Free of pests and only prune if damaged or too big. **H x S** 30cm x 30cm