

Cultural Details: **Delphinium**

An essential component of any perennial programme, these border plants are sold as green plants with a colour label, in Autumn, Spring and early Summer. Shorter types can also be sold in flower. The Chinensis (Grandiflorum) types, though perennial, are generally grown and sold as annuals, for sale in flower as they are naturally compact.

As a garden plant, some support is advisable for tall varieties, to prevent collapse of the crop.

Delphiniums are relatively straightforward to raise.

Variety Selection

Amongst the perennial types, the tall Pacific Giants and more compact Magic Fountains are the most popular choices, generally sold as named separate colours rather than mixtures. Magic Fountains can also be sold as a flowering plant in a larger pot. The Belladonna Hybrids have more open flower stems, and produce good cut flowers. Nudicaule Laurin is a compact variety which can be flowered in the pot. Zalil, the yellow-flowered variety, is not always hardy in the UK. Although its seeds are relatively expensive, Centurion Sky Blue produces some of the most spectacular flowers in the Summer Trials at Moles Seeds.

Moles Seeds has a selection of Grandiflorum (Chinense) varieties in blue shades and white, for Summer sales in flower. These make good subjects for Summer container plant sales.

Programming the crop

Generally sown in June or July, once the Summer bedding is out of the way, for sales in Autumn and Spring as green plants.

However from an early sowing (January-early February) Magic Fountains should flower in the same year.

Sow Grandiflorum types, Belladonna and Laurin in January or early February, for flowering in June and July of the same year.

Propagation and Growing-on

Use clean trays, bench tops and water supply to reduce disease potential. Sow the (500-1500 per gram, depending on species) onto the surface of an open seed sowing compost. Seed can also be sown straight into module trays, to avoid root disturbance.

Cover the seeds with a layer of vermiculite, and cover trays with clear or milky polythene to maintain humidity, until the first seedlings are visible. Germination takes around 14 days at 15-18°C. In the height of Summer, this temperature might be difficult to achieve – find as cool and shaded a place as possible.

As soon as large enough to handle (around 4 weeks after sowing), move into larger plug trays and grow on until they have filled the cells and are ready to be potted up, into 9-10cm pots. Grow on at 10-15°C if January-February sown, otherwise as cool as possible for the Summer sowings. In Spring, the Summer-sown plants can be moved on into 2 or 3 litre pots for premium sales.

During the Winter, do not overwater, or the plants are likely to rot off. Keep them under cover in an unheated glasshouse or polytunnel, on the dry side. When growth recommences in the Spring, begin a liquid feed programme.

Pest and Disease

Maintain good air movement through the crop, and water in the morning rather than the evening to keep the foliage dry and lessen attack by Botrytis. Pay good attention to glasshouse hygiene, using only fresh trays, pots, compost, water and clean bench tops to avoid damping-off diseases, and check for the presence of insect pests such as aphids and spray as required. Slugs are very fond of the emerging leaves in Spring. Powdery Mildew can affect the crop – monitor and spray accordingly, according to the chemical manufacturer's guidelines.

Information provided for guidance only, as cultural practices and climatic circumstances vary.