

## GERANIUMS (*Pelargoniums*)

**Note:** The true geranium (commonly called Cranesbill) is a hardy, long-lived perennial quite distinct from the pelargonium. This plant also thrives in sun or partial shade, and varies from a three-inch mound to a three-foot high specimen, depending upon species.

### ZONAL GERANIUMS (*Pelargonium spp.*)

**Zonal geraniums** are distinguished by a darker green to blackish zone circling the center of each leaf. There are thousands of species available with red, pink, apricot, tangerine, salmon, or white flowers. **Fancy leaf** geraniums have varicolored leaves including beautiful bronzes, scarlets, and cream yellows. The newer **stellar** zonal geraniums have star-shaped multi-colored variegated leaves and star-shaped flowers.

**Culture:** Preferred spring and summer temperature is 60° F, but geraniums tolerate a wide temperature range. Abundant sunlight and good air circulation are necessary. Poor light results in few flowers and stunted growth. Geraniums may thrive in a sunny window that is too hot for other foliage plants during the summer; small or miniature varieties are best for windowsills. Dwarfs stay under eight inches in height and will grow for months, even years, in a two to four inch pot. Three-inch miniatures may have leaves as small as a thumbnail, yet flowers large enough to cover the entire plant. Varieties with variegated leaves are also available.

Moderate moisture and good drainage are essential for these plants. Potting soil should consist of three parts loam, one part each sand and peat moss or coir; pack firmly around roots. Water thoroughly, then wait until the top one-inch of soil is dry before watering again. Overwatered plants may suffer a fungal disease called blackleg, in which the base of the stems turn black, rot, and die. Geraniums flower best when slightly pot bound, especially the miniatures. Fertilize every week with 20-20-20 when plant is in active growth and flower, but not when resting in winter. Pinch first growing tips when well established if more bushiness is desired, remembering that each pinching will delay flowering one month.

**Moving Plants Indoors:** Plants that spend summer outdoors will develop yellow leaves and the flower buds will not open when they are moved abruptly indoors in the fall. It is better to prepare the plants for dormant winter storage and/or take cuttings to start more plants for spring bloom. (If winter bloom is desired, cuttings should be taken in the spring and the plants raised inside all summer. These plants can be rejuvenated each spring by cutting back to six inches.)

**Wintering Over Plants:** To store bedding plants over winter, dig the plants before the first heavy frost. Cut tops back to about six inches (save some tip shoots for cuttings if you like), pack roots close together in deep boxes and cover with light garden soil or sawdust. Potted plants may be pruned to six inches and left in their containers. Store them in a dimly lit area where the temperature is 40 to 45°F. Water soil well the first time and check occasionally throughout the winter, watering only to prevent plants from shriveling. In early April, pot the surviving plants in fertile soil, water them well, and place in bright light to develop large, well-branched plants for summer bedding.

**Propagation:** To propagate plants from cuttings in late August or early September, cut off short, jointed tip shoots, four to six inches long, just below a node. Break off the leaves at this node and stick the cuttings in a mixture of half peat moss and half perlite, just deep enough to keep them upright. Rooting hormone powder or liquid may be used if desired. Put the pot of cuttings in a well-sealed polyethylene bag or cover with a plastic cup for a few days. Place the pot near bright light, but not in direct sun. The cuttings should root in four to five weeks and can then be planted separately in containers of potting soil. Cuttings should be pinched back twice — once in January to promote side branching, and again before mid-February to pinch branches to encourage fullness. Any additional pinching will delay flowering another month.

## **REGAL or MARTHA WASHINGTON GERANIUM**

*(Pelargonium domesticum)*

This species will produce a huge flush of bloom in the spring, but only an occasional flower later in the summer. They grow to a height of two feet and are available with flowers in many soft pastel shades. They perform better indoors as hot sun will fade the flowers and moisture will rot the petals. Purchase only plants with visible flower buds already forming; if the plant has been pinched too late in the growth cycle, the buds will have been removed and the plant will not produce more.

These geraniums are difficult to winter over as they must be cut back and root pruned, repotted in a smaller pot and watered occasionally while stored in a bright, cold area. In February, water more frequently and move back into a larger pot as soon as the plant is growing strongly. **Do not pinch** — plants will branch naturally and flower buds are now forming. Stake top-heavy flower heads.

If propagating by cuttings, the cuttings need to be pinched as described above. These plants can be summered outdoors if cut back severely after bloom. They tend to get rangy in beds and need to be watched for aphids and whitefly.

## **IVY LEAF GERANIUM**

*(Pelargonium peltatum)*

The leathery leaves of these plants are shaped like English ivy but are not related. Ivy leaf geraniums excel in hanging baskets but need morning sun and late afternoon shade, and a moist, cool atmosphere indoors. They prefer even soil moisture and do not tolerate fluctuations in soil moisture. Leaves will turn yellow in high heat. Flowers are often veined with a darker shade of their color and bloom in showy clusters throughout the summer.

## **SCENTED GERANIUM**

*(Pelargonium spp.)*

These geraniums have scented leaves and are available in many delicious fragrances, including lemon, rose, nutmeg, apple, coconut, chocolate, and mint. They are slightly less demanding pelargoniums, needing less sun than the zonal and ivy leaf types. They can be found in upright, spreading or trailing forms depending upon the variety. The flowers are small and not showy. Propagate from cuttings in the spring. The leaves, fresh or dried, are useful for potpourris, sachets, and in cooking.

## **PESTS OF GERANIUMS**

Common diseases, Insect problems, and chemical control information about geraniums can be found at:

[Hortsense](#)

### **References:**

Ophardt, Marianne C., WSU Extension faculty. The Much Improved Garden Geranium. Washington State University Garden Tips. 5/18/2012

Washington State University Hortsense

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