

## Author's choice

These *Helenium* are among Martin Hughes-Jones's favourites:

### ***Helenium* 'El Dorado'**

Flowering season: June–September. Height: 100cm (39in). Selection with big gold flowers over a long period and a well-branched habit.

### ***H.* 'Rauchtopas'**

Flowering season: mid-August–early September. Height: 110cm (43in). Outstanding selection with well-spaced, amber petals marked red-brown below.

### ***H.* 'Flammendes Käthchen'**

Flowering season: best in mid-August. Height: 125cm (49in). Has small orange-red flowers. Good with tall grasses.

### ***H.* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'**

Flowering season: July–October, if deadheaded. Height: 90cm (35in). Blooms open orange-red, fading variably to orange and yellow.

### ***H.* 'Moerheim Beauty'**

Flowering season: July–October, if deadheaded. Height: 80cm (31in). Popular, with red flowers fading to tawny brown. Not the most vigorous.

### ***H.* 'Flammenrad'**

Flowering season: early August–early September. Height: 100cm (39in). Fine selection with large yellow flowers marked orange-red; introduced by German nurseryman Karl Foerster.

### ***H.* 'Rubinzweg'**

Flowering season: August. Height: 70cm (28in). Popular selection with neat, dark red daisies.

### ***H.* 'Ragamuffin'**

Flowering season: late August–September. Height: 120cm (47in). Selection with upwardly swept, yellow petals, marked with light red. Good rain resistance.

### ***H.* 'Riverton Beauty'**

Flowering season: late August–September. Height: 160cm (63in). Yellow-flowered cultivar dating from at least 1909 with a robust constitution.

### ***H.* 'Margot'**

Flowering season: early August–early September. Height: 120cm (47in). A good red and yellow selection for UK conditions.



*Helenium*  
'El Dorado'



*Helenium*  
'Rauchtopas'



*Helenium*  
'Flammendes Käthchen'



*Helenium*  
'Sahin's Early Flowerer'



*Helenium*  
'Moerheim Beauty'

# Soaking up the sun

Vibrant heleniums are popular for their appealingly fiery blooms, but how can gardeners get the best from them? >>

Author: **Martin Hughes-Jones**, nurseryman and *Helenium* grower.  
Photography: **Martin Hughes-Jones**



*Helenium*  
'Flammenrad'



*Helenium*  
'Rubinzweg'



*Helenium*  
'Ragamuffin'



*Helenium*  
'Riverton Beauty'



*Helenium*  
'Margot'



**H**eleniums are North American perennial daisies flowering in mid- to late summer. They are hardy across Britain and, with a few simple rules, straightforward to grow. The beautiful flowers in yellow, orange, red and dark red have a distinctive large central disk which is sometimes called a 'cone'. This can vary from lime-green to chocolate-brown and often provides an attractive contrast to the 'petals' (botanically, ray florets).

Heleniums make useful nectar sources for bees and butterflies; as with other daisies, the individual flowers are long lasting because the one set of petals serve as flags for insects for the hundreds of individual florets that make up the central cone. They also make excellent, long-lasting cut flowers to take into the house.

For garden purposes, there are two distinct groups: those that begin flowering in June or July and those that start to bloom in August. The early starters tend to be shorter and are more closely related to an American west-coast species, *Helenium bigelovii*. These will frequently repeat flower later in the season, especially if deadheaded regularly.

Taller selections reaching up to 2m (6½ft) bloom in late July, August and September and have more in common with *H. autumnale*, which grows wild to the east of the Rockies and as far north as Canada. They have one glorious flush of blooms, most often in August, but will not respond to deadheading.

**Border stalwarts**

Traditional herbaceous borders often include a sprinkling of heleniums. Together with *Achillea*, *Phlox*, *Helianthus*, *Rudbeckia* and *Solidago*, they contribute to the explosion of colour in high summer.

However, the recent interest in



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naturalistic or prairie planting styles has produced a new series of exciting planting combinations and has helped renew interest in heleniums. The genus has proved especially effective with many umbels (cow parsley relatives), such as fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), *Angelica*, *Selinum* species and rough chervil (*Chaerophyllum temulum*), and also with bigger grasses such as *Stipa gigantea* and *Miscanthus* cultivars.

Careful selection of helenium cultivars will ensure a prolonged season of colour. For example, a planting containing *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty', 'El Dorado', 'Dunkelpracht', 'Flammendes Käthchen' and 'Chipperfield Orange' will provide colour from mid-June

**In the Main Borders at RHS Garden Harlow Carr, the marmalade and amber tones of heleniums merge well with red *Monarda* 'Gardenview Scarlet' and purple *Agastache*.**

to October, reaching a crescendo in late July and August.

**Raising new plants**

Growing heleniums from seed is fairly straightforward. Collect seed-heads when ripe in autumn, place in a paper bag or envelope and keep cool in a well-ventilated place to dry. Then extract the fine seed by rolling the heads between finger and thumb. Sow the seed and chaff mixture in late winter on the surface of seed compost. You will get plenty of seedlings and some may flower the first year, but none will be anything like the plant from which you collected the seed. However, this is a great way to find good new cultivars. Keep as many as you have space for, weeding out poorer ones until you are left with the best; this is how I selected *H.* 'Ragamuffin'.

If you want a particular selection, then you need to divide a plant or take cuttings. This is easy provided one rule is obeyed: always propagate in spring, just as plants are



*‘Careful selection of helenium cultivars will ensure a prolonged season of colour.’*

*Other selections to try* (H: flowering height, F: months in flower)



*Helenium* 'Kugelsonne'  
H: 100CM (39IN) F: AUGUST



*H.* 'Indianersommer'  
H: 100CM (39IN) F: AUG–SEPT



*H.* 'Feuersiegel'  
H: 140CM (55IN) F: AUGUST



*H.* 'Chipperfield Orange'  
H: 160CM (63IN) F: AUG–SEPT



*H.* 'Zimbelstern'  
H: 100CM (39IN) F: AUGUST



*H.* 'Lambada'  
H: 110CM (43IN) F: AUGUST



*H.* 'Biedermeier'  
H: 125CM (49IN) F: AUG–SEPT



*H.* 'Kanaria'  
H: 125CM (49IN) F: JULY–AUG



*H.* 'Waltraut'  
H: 90CM (35IN) F: JULY–SEPT



*H.* 'Gartensonne'  
H: 200CM (79IN) F: AUGUST



*H.* 'Kupferziegel'  
H: 100CM (39IN) F: SEPTEMBER



*H.* 'Königstiger'  
H: 130CM (51IN) F: AUGUST





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starting growth. Late March or early April is generally best. Propagation in autumn has high failure rates.

The easiest method is to divide an established plant by lifting the crown and levering it apart with two forks, or use a single fork and tease off a strong piece from the edge of a clump. If you need many new plants then, once you have a clump lifted, wash it and prise apart with your fingers into individual rosettes and pot them up to grow on for a few weeks before planting out.

Early spring is also the best time to rejuvenate old clumps. After three to five years many cultivars start to lose vigour and need dividing. Select only the most robust and healthy

**In the Mixed Borders at RHS Garden Wisley, *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer' grows through birch supports backed by yellow-leaved *Cornus alba* 'Aurea'.**

parts of a clump. Some cultivars such as *H. 'Riverton Beauty'*, however, will be strong for decades while others will fade out in the centre and look sickly – your eyes are the best judge.

## Ensuring plant health

*Heleniums* grow in most soils except those that dry out. They thrive in full sun but tolerate light shade. Cultivars that reach 1m (39in) tall or more will need staking; possibly the most effective and least visible means of support is with pea sticks. Use last winter's twiggy prunings from deciduous shrubs and position them through the clumps as they make rapid growth in late April and May.

*Heleniums* can respond well to the

technique known as the 'Chelsea chop', where growing tips are cut back by about 10–15cm (4–6in) in late May forming a shorter, more-branched and later-flowering plant. Deadheading extends flowering of cultivars that bloom in June and July, such as *H. 'Moerheim Beauty'*, *'Sahin's Early Flowerer'* and *'Waltraut'*.

Pests and diseases affecting *heleniums* are limited. Slugs can demolish soft new growth of small plants overnight in spring while phlox eelworm causes distortion and lack of vigour, most noticeably as growth commences. When propagating, select healthy-looking material; I suspect viruses have contributed to the decline of older cultivars so reject any with leaf blemishes or mottling and sterilise knives used for propagation.

Despite this, some older selections are near bomb proof, and a few have been around for a century; given their popularity, there seems no reason why many will not be gracing gardens a hundred years from now. ●

## SUPPLIERS

Most *Helenium* mentioned are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2012–2013*.

❖ **National Plant Collection of *Helenium*** (open by appointment): Special Perennials, Yew Tree House, Hall Lane, Hankelow, Crewe, Cheshire CW3 0JB; 01270 811443; [www.specialperennials.com](http://www.specialperennials.com)

❖ **Author's collection:** Holbrook Garden (an RHS Partner Garden), Sampford Peverell, Tiverton, Devon EX16 7EN; 01884 821164; [www.holbrookgarden.com](http://www.holbrookgarden.com) **Open** 10am–5pm, Wed–Fri, until 14 Sept.

## Using heleniums at RHS Garden Wisley

Sean Harkin, Horticultural Team Leader at RHS Garden Wisley



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*Heleniums* are part of the 'hot' palette of planting in the Mixed Borders at Wisley. Here, cultivars such as *Helenium* 'Waltraut' and *H. 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'* enjoy soil enriched by years of home-made compost, which has produced a fertile, moisture-retentive loam. The clumps are staked with birch prunings, and we give a 'Chelsea chop' to *H. 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'* to hold back flowering so it starts

with the others for the peak displays.

In the Glasshouse Borders, as part of the prairie display, we have planted *heleniums* in 'rivers', with tall grasses (such as *Pennisetum macrourum*) softening the effect and adding movement. Here, cultivars such as *H. 'Riverton Beauty'* and *H. 'The Bishop'* are 'treated mean and kept keen'. The soil is poor with a gravel mulch; the borders are on a slope and we carry out no feeding or watering. Even in these

conditions they reach good heights. Below here, on the Glasshouse Landscape, one of my favourite uses of these plants can be admired: clumps of *H. 'Moerheim Beauty'* with *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination' sweeping across the landscape, the orange *heleniums* contrasting with the purple *veronicastrum* for an amazing display.

In these areas we do not stake, but do play around with Chelsea chopping to achieve different heights in the rivers to prolong flowering. Neither do we deadhead: we find that plants flower profusely without it and we benefit from seedheads through autumn and winter (we cut them back in late winter). Mixed with grasses, the seedheads catch low winter light and frost beautifully.



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