



RHS / JERRY HARPUR

From the high and dry

The alpine house at RHS Garden Harlow Carr is home to many beautiful plants, some of which are easy to grow if protected from winter wet. Author & photography: **Kaye Griffiths**, alpine specialist, RHS Garden Harlow Carr

Alpine plants, in all their dazzling diversity, are presumed by many to be the preserve of specialist gardeners, having distinct needs and needing particular treatment.

In their natural environments they are found at high altitude between tree line and permanent snow line.

Plants that need an airy, bright and cool environment to flourish such as *Draba cusickii* (above right) find ideal conditions in the alpine house at RHS Garden Harlow Carr (above).

The term 'alpine' covers a wide range of plants: not all are native to mountainous areas (in the Arctic alpins can be found at sea level) and although most are particularly hardy, they are often intolerant of winter wet. This is why collections including more challenging species are usually grown in alpine houses. Others however thrive in the open.



Welcome attraction

The alpine house at Harlow Carr opened in May 2009. It provides a focal point in the garden, as well as somewhere for visitors (not to mention the plants growing inside) to shelter from the rain.

Alpine houses need excellent ventilation; our 23m (75ft) long house is 5.5m (18ft) high, which >>

Interesting alpines at RHS Garden Harlow Carr



Physoplexis comosa

From the Alps comes an unusual campanula relative, commonly called tufted horned rampion. An excellent plant for an alpine house or well-drained rock garden outdoors, it flowers May–June. Give it a limy, well-drained soil or compost, but keep the plant moist. It will die down each autumn, to reappear the following spring.



Pelargonium endlicherianum

This splendid species is native to South Africa and is one of few hardy pelargoniums, producing multiple stems of neon-pink flowers. Grow it in full sun and free-draining soil to ensure it gets through the harshest winters and stays compact. Although best under glass it should survive outdoors in a free-draining spot. Easy to propagate via division.



Dionysia 'Monika'

This pretty pale yellow-flowered plant is a relative of common primrose. *Dionysia* are native to Iran and Afghanistan, clinging onto life on cliffs. They need an alpine house and the sharpest drainage; grow them in a compost that is little more than dirty grit. They must never dry out, and need watering from beneath. Provide shade in summer.



Centaurea achтарovii

This attractive alpine hails from Bulgaria and is a short, spreading knapweed with pink spidery flowers, held well above beautiful, silvery foliage. It appreciates moist yet free-draining soils and can run and spread quite quickly. Plants can be grown in pots or troughs of well-drained soil or in sunny, sheltered spots in gravelly soil outdoors.



Calceolaria 'Walter Shrimpton'

This appealing plant is a visitors' favourite in May when the unusual and eye-catching pouched blooms open. It will perform best grown under glass in well-drained soil, but must be kept moist. It is fine outdoors if given a bit of shelter and, again, kept moist. Watch for aphids. Propagate from tip cuttings, which root easily in October.

ensures a good 'chimney' effect, whereby hot air rises from the top vents, drawing cooler air in from sides and doors. As a result, on hot days the interior is often cooler than outdoors. Fans and thermal screens also help keep the air cool in summer.

A number of raised planting beds and three plunge beds, made from sandstone boulders, display plants at waist height. Plunge beds are useful for alpines with a short but spectacular season of interest, or for those that prove tricky to grow, as they can be cosseted behind the scenes then plunged out when they come into flower. Pot-grown plants here include bulbous *Massonia*, with their paired leaves and crowns of white or pinkish flowers; mound-forming, yellow-flowered *Benthamiella patagonica*,

VISITING
RHS Garden Harlow Carr is open 9.30am–4pm, Nov–Feb (to 6pm, Mar–Oct). For contact details, see RHS Life (Diary, p88).

SUPPLIERS
Most plants in this article are freely available and listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2011–2012*.

(an unlikely member of the potato family); various hybrids of *Androsace* and *Dionysia*, their cushion-like growth crowded with flowers in spring, not to mention choice spring-flowering bulbs and many *Saxifraga*.

Permanent appeal

By contrast, the planted beds contain a backbone of shrubs and conifers to give permanent height and interest. Examples include *Pinus parviflora* 'Gyok-ke-sen', a slow-growing pine with blue-grey needles; shrubby *Halimium ocymoides* with delicate yellow, dark-eyed flowers; showy spring flowering *Rhododendron johnstoneanum*, a species with fragrant, creamy-white flowers; and weird *Aciphylla glaucescens* with its needle-like blue leaves.

Elsewhere are plants such as chocolate-scented *Berlandiera lyrata* adding splashes of yellow, and *Campanula garganica* 'W.H. Paine' flushing blue in the rockwork. Drifts of spring and autumn *Crocus* are planted throughout, adding colour at quieter times of the year. Some plants (such as white-flowered, cushion-forming *Androsace vandellii*) are so at home that they seed around, softening the appearance of the rocks.

Many beautiful alpines can make good plants outdoors, but if you provide some overhead protection the range can increase dramatically. ●

www.rhs.org.uk Enter 'Easy alpines' in the search box at RHS Online for some plants to try outdoors.
❖ www.rhs.org.uk/harlowcarr

How to grow alpines outdoors



Kaye Griffiths, who tends the alpines at RHS Harlow Carr, gives cultural advice on how best to grow alpines out in the open air, with a few suggestions on which make the best garden plants

Growing tips

- ❖ Choose a free-draining growing mix; one part grit to one part soil-based medium.
- ❖ When planting leave the rootball slightly proud and mulch with grit.
- ❖ Try growing in raised beds to allow good drainage.
- ❖ Keep plants in the open free from fallen leaves so that moisture does not build up in the crown.
- ❖ Try growing plants such as *Lewisia cotyledon* in crevices in

walls, ideally below an overhang, to prevent crowns getting wet in winter and rotting off.

- ❖ Some cushion plants such as various *Androsace* can do well outdoors if protected from wet: overwinter under a sheet of Perspex or toughened glass.

Alpines for outdoors

- ❖ *Androsace lanuginosa*: Clump-forming alpine with grey, woolly leaves and heads of pale pink flowers in spring. Plant in an open, free-draining spot in a rock garden.

- ❖ *Aquilegia saximontana*: A tiny columbine from the Rockies, with blue and white flowers above bluish divided foliage; good for a trough or rock garden.
- ❖ *Morina longifolia*: Thistle-like leaves and 90cm (36in) spires of pink and white flowers. From the Himalaya, but often grown in well-drained perennial borders.
- ❖ *Saxifraga* 'Karel Capek': Mound-forming plant with dense, tiny, silvery leaves; in spring it is studded with showy pink flowers. Good for growing on rockwork.

