

THE GENUS GERANIUM

From the Greek word *geranion*, meaning “little crane”, we get the genus *Geranium* of which there are roughly 400 species. It's no surprise then that the commonly used name for this genus is Cranesbill for the fruit's resemblance to the elongated bill of a crane. *Geranium* species can be found across the globe, including Europe, North America, South Africa, New Zealand and much of Asia. Some confusion arises with the genus *Pelargonium* as *Geranium* is often used erroneously as the common name. When Linnaeus published his works in the mid 1700's, *Geranium*, *Pelargonium*, and *Erodium* were consolidated within the genus *Geranium* but were later divided into separate genera within the family of Geraniaceae. While most true *Geraniums* (Hardy Geraniums) are hardy to our region, *Pelargoniums* are found almost exclusively in South Africa and are not hardy in many other areas of the world. In this region, *Pelargoniums* (Zonal Geraniums) are grown as annual bedding and container plants. These discrepancies in hardiness and culture resulted in an eventual split between the genera about 20 years after Linnaeus's publication.



When identifying a *Geranium*, always remember the number five. Flowers have five sepals, five petals, and stamens in multiples of five (5,10,15). A worthy sidenote is that through breeding, some flowers are bred for multiple petal layers with fused styles and pistils, making a distinct five-part, star-like stigma at the end. *Geranium* leaves also tend to be dissected into five lobes but as is the case with many flowers, breeding efforts have made that rule a bit of a gray area.



Light requirements vary slightly between species of *Geranium*, but most enjoy dappled shade. With proper moisture, many perform well in sunnier locations with profuse blooms. One species preferring the dappled shade of our woodland environment is *Geranium maculatum* and its associated cultivars. With our woodland's rich nutrients and fair moisture, this species will prefer consistent moisture!

Geranium phaeum, on the other hand, can handle drier sites and while it still appreciates some shade, it will form dense mounds in the garden, often retaining its foliage in winter as an added bonus. *Geranium pratense* is more moderate in its site conditions, adapting to some sun with proper moisture, and at the same time, can prove quite tolerant in dry sites with shade. *G. pratense* also sports more unique flower colors which trend towards soft blues and white hues more than pinks and purples.



Geranium sanguineum
'New Hampshire Purple'

Bright pink to white solitary flowers comprises much of the *Geranium sanguineum* collection. This species thrives in full sun and its nativity to the Caucasus region has engrained in it a love of sun and drier conditions. Pink flowers of all shades form on dense mounds of finely dissected foliage, providing a dense groundcover that suppresses garden weeds.

If you have a wide variety of cultural conditions in your garden, there are yet other options! *Geranium macrorrhizum* can go from full sun to dappled shade and adapts to many soil conditions aside from waterlogged areas. Spreading slowly by rhizome, this plant also makes an excellent groundcover bringing an array of white and pink flowers in the spring. The stems are also able to root themselves if laid on the soil for a long period.

In our area, *Geranium cinereum* is an often-underused species, especially since it is difficult to track down in our local nurseries! Lucky for you, we'll be carrying two cultivars in our spring selection. This plant rewards gardeners with a beautifully distinct venation on its flowers, helping to provide a unique bicolor accent in the landscape. Many plants in this species are a bit more delicate than others but they are certainly worthy plants once mature.

Our last pick is *Geranium xcantabrigiense* and its associated cultivars which are true workhorses in the garden. These plants are highly adaptable to a wide range of site conditions while providing fragrance, a compact habit, and mostly evergreen foliage. As a wonderful addition to their seasonality, these plants bronze to a beautiful red in the fall. UDBG has several species and cultivars that make excellent groundcovers, and one is even receiving top marks as a contender in our formal groundcover research trials!



Geranium
xcantabrigiense

All in all, with their copious and long flowering displays, fragrance, wide array of colors and foliage, and fall color, there is truly a *Geranium* for every garden. It's no wonder they've been in cultivation so long and we are pleased to offer a well-represented selection this year.

