

## Dianthus

One of the oldest and most popular garden flowers is Dianthus – pinks, carnations and Sweet Williams, or Stinking Billies to many Scots. With strikingly beautiful blooms and strong, but delicious scent, this is a must for borders, pots and planters.

Over many centuries, gardeners and plant breeders have developed countless thousands of cultivars – 30,000 and rising – so we're more spoilt for choice of colour and shape than with virtually any other plant. Recent research by the Spanish botanist, Pablo Vargas, reported in 'Science News' in 2010, has shown that *dianthus* has developed new species much more quickly than any other plant or than land vertebrates. By finding genetic differences between species and linking them to fossil remains, Vargas shows that new species developed very quickly between 2 and 1.3 million years ago, at a time when the world was becoming drier. Even now, pinks and carnations prefer dry conditions; and because most pinks flower during the summer when plants have to compete for pollinators, the study showed they were under strong pressure to change their appearance to attract insects already spoilt for choice at that time of year.

So it's been much easier for breeders to produce new cultivars, especially as the plants will freely hybridise, not only between varieties within a species but between the species themselves. While tall carnations are difficult to grow successfully or need the shelter of a greenhouse, we gardeners will usually plump for: border carnations, *Dianthus caryophyllus*, that will grow to around 60cm and are often used as cut flowers; the lower, clumping pinks, *D. plumarius*, perfect for borders and, in my view, even better in pots; and the very low growing alpines, *D. alpinus*. Fashions and fads in dianthus colour and shape changed with every generation. Carnations with coloured stripes were all the rage in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, but they were soon to be supplemented by flowers with different coloured spots, or piquettes. Another variety, 'Raby Castle', with salmon pink flowers and darker flecks, first became popular 150 years ago. The double flowered pure white, 'Mrs Sinkins', was first marketed in 1872 and, like 'Raby Castle, can still be tracked down today. Much closer to home, the rare but still available, 'Paisley Gem' was first raised in 1798 by John Mcree, a Paisley muslin worker. He was so pleased with the plant that he presented one to King George III. So some of the dianthus we still grow have a pretty long pedigree.

If you're specially keen on one pink and are afraid you might lose it over the winter, replicate it by taking cuttings, as seed could produce quite a different colour. During the summer, choose several non flowering stems, neatly cutting to just above the node, and remove all but the top 4 leaves. Plant in gritty, free-draining compost avoiding peat-based compost as it will retain moisture that could rot the plant. [not that any gardener with an eye to the environment would consider peat in any case]. I then insert 2 or 3 small twigs, put the pot in a clear plastic bag which I blow up and knot like a balloon. This gives the cuttings a good boost of carbon dioxide to get them going. Taking cuttings is the only reliable way of getting the flower you want, without, of course, buying a named variety at a nursery or garden centre.

My pinks have won a prize for surviving last winter: even though they were a dry, brown mess, they somehow managed to burst into life, so, against all the odds, they'll brighten up the patio for another year. They grow in pots, spilling over the edge and looking fantastic. They do thrive best in a neutral soil, so if yours is acid, you can still provide the right growing conditions with the compost you use. Why not fork in a handful of ground limestone or use limestone chips as a mulch?

Pinks have a horrible tendency to rot at the base, so add grit and sand to compost to improve drainage and, when planting, keep all the leaves well above the soil. It's also important to ignore the general maxim of feeding pot plants or adding a top dressing of compost to the border: they rot in rich soil. Finally, pinks respond well to dead heading and will reward you with yet more flowering.

Yet another good reason for growing pinks is the fragrant flavour the petals add to a summer wine cup.