

Growing *Delphinium elatum*

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Delphiniums are tall, spectacular plants that definitely deserve to be known as the 'Queen of the Border'. They are one of the few garden plants that flower true blue but also may be mauve, purple, pink, cream or bicour. Delphiniums flower from mid June to mid July and often repeat bloom in the autumn.

Surprising to most gardeners, is the fact that there are over 350 delphinium species, primarily native to mountainous regions. This explains the need for sunny and well-drained conditions. The original species have very simple, often unattractive flowers with only five petals. In order to create modern hybrids, the number of chromosomes was doubled resulting in florets of at least thirteen petals, often more. One renowned strain is the Pacific Giants which were bred in California, emphasizing the separation of colours and seed production from three flowerings a year but unable to test for winter-hardiness. The quality of this strain has now diminished with open pollination replacing labour-intensive breeding for strong vigorous plants. Breeding has been carried out in Britain for more than a century. The Delphinium Society, based in the UK recently celebrated its 75th anniversary.

Often delphiniums are thought of as difficult and time consuming to grow but this is not the case. The British strain is very hardy and relatively trouble-free. While like all plants, they thrive in ideal conditions, a few basic growing techniques will ensure quality spikes in any garden. Delphiniums will grow well in most soil types but the soil should never become waterlogged as this will promote crown rot. It may be necessary to raise the soil-level slightly for improved drainage. Delphiniums resent being moved so prepare the site well by removing all perennial weeds and adding slow release fertilizer such as compost, bone meal or well-rotted manure.

When planting, water the hole well, position the plant at the same depth as in the pot, firm the soil and water again, checking the soil level. Larger size, strong, quality potted plants will adapt better especially in established gardens. Water the plant as required depending on weather conditions. After the first year, delphiniums produce a coarse anchor root in addition to their fibrous roots so they resent being moved. Basal cuttings are the recommended method of propagation. This is best in spring when the stems are three to four inches tall.

In early spring, it is recommended to remove the weaker stems just above ground-level so the larger stems increase in size and strength. This simple task will greatly improve the floral display produced. Spring is also the easiest time to insert three strong four-foot bamboo stakes around the delphinium. As the plant grows, garden twine can be tied from stake to stake at the base of the flower spike. This cord will provide support for the stems during times of strong winds but allow them to move, shaking off the rain.

An established delphinium is quite drought tolerant since the main growth periods are in the cool, moist spring and autumn. A thorough watering once a week preferably at soil level will reduce stress on the plant and mulching may be beneficial but not directly over the crown of the plant. Frequent watering by overhead sprinklers may encourage mildew on some plants.

After the main spike has flowered, remove it but leave the small side stems, referred to as laterals, extending the bloom. Leaving as much of the foliage as possible after the bloom promotes strong roots. Most gardeners design their beds with other plants in front of their delphiniums to hide the dying foliage. Delphiniums usually repeat bloom in the autumn with new

growth appearing in the cooler moist weather. If you allow the plant to set seed it is less likely to repeat bloom.

In late autumn, cut the plant off at ground level and clear the beds of all debris to reduce the possibility of spring slug damage. Do not mulch over the crown as this also promotes rot. The British and Canadian strains of delphiniums have been bred for winter hardiness and will enjoy a good snow cover if Mother Nature provides it. However more important to their survival is the winter rest period, also enjoyed by Canadian gardeners.

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