

Helenium Man and the Seven Dwarfs



Hi-ho, Hi-ho, it's SpecialPerennials' very own
Martin Blow

I had it coming to me. Confessing on national TV to being “a helenium nut” is likely to stick with you and it certainly has with me. Having said that, most people now recognise me as the “the helenium man” which, as notoriety goes, isn't too bad a thing.

Janet and I are totally addicted to Heleniums and who wouldn't be? All those brilliant colours in summer and autumn and all those bees and butterflies creating a gentle buzz in the garden as they are attracted magnet-like to the centres of the flowers. We grow lots of varieties in our garden and try to propagate for sale as many types as possible. This year we have 35 types in our catalogue and most will be available at Plant Hunters' Fairs early in the season.

Heleniums are justly popular now (and I think we can take some credit for this) but it wasn't always so. I remember vividly one long standing nurseryman asking me what plants we specialised in, and dismissing our passion with “oh, those floppy daisies”. He lived to learn better (just!).

I suppose he was right in a way. Those straggly seed grown specimens offered as simply as “Helenium” or worse, “Helenium hoopesii”; a slug dinner that rarely flowers in northern climates and is, thankfully, no longer classified as a helenium,

are hardly worth garden room.

Most modern Heleniums stand up well casting off the “floppy” tag for good!

There are of course some short, dare I say “dwarf”, varieties now available suitable for the front of the border and these have really long flowering periods – from mid-June until well into October and beyond. I say “dwarf” but let's be clear that I'm talking knee-high or less and it's also worth saying that if you feed them a lot, they're going to get taller – heleniums really respond to feeding – so just a light feed in spring and no “miracle grow” or some such unless you want miracles of growth!

The long flowering period is bred-into these varieties, but it does require that you regularly dead head the spent blooms and for helenium novices remember that dead heads are like brown balls and new buds are like green sun-shines: don't get them mixed up!

Here's my favourite Seven Dwarf heleniums; there's certainly **Happy** here but I've yet to find a **Bashful** one. If you keep them well watered, they won't be **Grumpy**. Don't be **Dopey** and over-feed them and remember in the winter they'll be **Sleepy** so cut



“Mardi Gras: a festival of flower”

Photo: SpecialPerennials



“Red Army, the best of the reds”

Photo: SpecialPerennials

continued >>>

them down to the ground then. Despite their common name they won't make you **Sneezy** but they are toxic if eaten. The 7th Dwarf is "**Doc**" but as heleniums are healthy plants you won't need to call on him!

1. "Mardi Gras": a festival of flower and a challenger for the best helenium of all and the first to flower usually. The flower colour is akin to the popular "Sahin's Early Flowerer" but Mardi Gras is half the height.

2. "Red Army": The best of the reds with large, black-centred, tomato-coloured flowers on neat, bushy plants. The flowers fade to a softer russet colour, so dead head early if you want the brightest display. The varieties Vivace, Kupferzwerg and Meranti are very similar to Red Army.

3. "Waltraut": a little taller but with wonderfully large flowers on straight stems. Definitely don't feed too much. Glowing orange at first and in the heady days of summer. As temperatures cool and light levels fall in October the flowers are more yellowy. Waltraut is female equivalent of the name Walter in her homeland of Germany.

4. "Gelbe Waltraut": meaning "Yellow Waltraut". A seedling sent to us from the late Hartmut Rieger, probably the greatest helenium collector of all time. It came up under a plant of Waltraut and is shorter and has pure yellow petals and a tan-brown centre.

5. "Carmen": Very similar to the old variety "Wyndley" but healthier and a little shorter. This new variety is going to become very popular.

6. "Fata Morgana": named after a type of mirage and the dancing flowers hover above the leaves are like a vision. A little taller than the other dwarfs.

7. "Pumilum Magnificum": Possibly the oldest cultivar still being grown. Introduced by Amos Perry in 1896. A little floppy so use bits of brush wood around the plants.

Spring is the best time to plant heleniums, although any time until the end of September is possible.

February (as I write this) is the best time to divide up plants for propagation so hi-ho it's off to work I go!

Martin runs SpecialPerennials with wife Janet and together they also organise all the Plant Hunters' Fairs.



"Waltraut has large flowers"

Photo: SpecialPerennials



"Gelbe Waltraut is pure yellow"

Photo: SpecialPerennials



"Fata Morgana like a mirage"

Photo: SpecialPerennials



"Carmen is a new variety"

Photo: SpecialPerennials



"Pumilum Magnificum from 1896"

Photo: SpecialPerennials