

## BRUNNERA - JEWELS OF THE SPRING GARDEN

*Don Witton*

There are always plenty of yellow flowers around in spring; daffodils and euphorbias, to name but two, so blue is a much-prized colour in my garden in April and May. For me, the go-to genus for masses of bright blue flowers for shady (but not too dry) spring borders is *Brunnera*, the perennial forget-me-not. The clusters of vivid blue flowers do resemble the hedgerow forget-me-not flowers but the likeness stops there, as *Myosotis sylvatica* is a short-lived plant which seeds prolifically. You will get seedlings from the basic species *Brunnera macrophylla*, but named forms rarely seed for me and they have a variety of variegated and coloured foliage which looks good for months into the summer, well after the flowers have finished.

They generally make rounded clumps, with branching flowering stems above the foliage and, unless stated otherwise, plants grow to between 18" and 2ft. The leaf texture in all forms is quite rough and hairy, making them a good alternative to hostas for foliage colour and interest in the summer, as slugs don't devour brunnera leaves as much as they do hostas.

*Brunnera* grows in forests and glades in the eastern Mediterranean, including Turkey and Russia. It is not a large genus of plant, with only three known species and about two dozen cultivars. Indeed, one of the two National Collections lists only 18 accessions, so it's quite easy to source and grow a comprehensive range.

I really rate these tough, but quietly elegant, plants for a shady spring border, and the electric-blue flowers look good amongst fresh green spring foliage or yellow-flowered plants, especially euphorbia. The white-flowered forms illuminate dark corners. If you don't grow them, give them a try this spring. Here are ten cultivars that I grow in my garden.

### *Brunnera mac.* 'Langtrees'

This was the first cultivar I acquired many years ago at one of our Plant Fairs. It is the one cultivar that I find will produce self-set seedlings. It has a few silver markings on the leaves, which are attractive, but there are better forms around now.

### *Brunnera mac.* 'Silver Wings'

'Silver Wings' is an improvement on 'Langtrees', with regular silver markings round the outside of the leaves, whilst the centre of the leaf remains green.



© Don Witton



***Brunnera mac.* 'Jack Frost' (AGM)**

This is perhaps the most popular and well known of all the *Brunnera* cultivars, as it is widely available. This popularity is well justified as the attractive leaves are all silver, broken up only by the green veining. It has a neat compact habit and, in full flower, it is a wonderful sight in spring.



© Don Witton

***Brunnera mac.* 'Looking Glass' (AGM)**

This sport of Jack Frost is often mistaken for Jack Frost but when grown side by side, the foliage difference is more apparent, as the leaves are a whiter silver and the colour is more solid, with only faint leaf veining.



© Don Witton

***Brunnera mac.* 'Hadspen Cream' (AGM)**

I bought this form many years ago in Hadspen Garden (which was in Somerset but has long since closed). The foliage has a classic, irregular cream-and-yellow variegated edge. Flower stems are quite long, with flower inflorescences often standing proud of the foliage clump.



© HPS Image Library



***Brunnera mac.* 'Dawson's White'**

Often found under the invalid name of *Brunnera mac.* 'Variegata', this is my favourite form, as it's very floriferous and the leaves have a thick white margin which is very pleasing on the eye. As a foliage plant after flowering it is as attractive as *Hosta* 'Patriot'.



© Don Witton

***Brunnera mac.* 'Langford Hewitt'**

A very unusual and rare form, which I acquired from the National Collection holder. The leaves initially emerge a dull green colour and as they mature, they turn yellow or have yellow markings. It's not the most floriferous cultivar but it can be grown in more sunshine than most, which will help the leaves to colour up more.



© Don Witton

***Brunnera mac.* 'Betty Bowring'**

Not all Brunneras have blue flowers and I grow two white flowered forms. The first has plain green leaves like the species and masses of white flowers which look good in a dark shady spot.



© Don Witton



***Brunnera mac.* 'Mr Morse' (AGM)**

Mr Morse has the white flowers of 'Betty Bowring' and the silvered foliage of 'Jack Frost'. However, I've had it now for a number of years and it has never made a large clump.



© HPS Image Library

***Brunnera mac.* 'Kings Ransom'**

My most recent acquisition is 'Kings Ransom'. Plenty of blue flowers top a clump of silvered leaves, similar to Jack Frost, which then have a yellow-variegated edge, the same as 'Hadspen Cream'.



© Don Witton