

Astrantia *Clive Lane*

Astrantias are long lived ‘petal performers’, grown in gardens since the 16th century, with a wealth of colourful country names - Hattie’s pinchusion, melancholy gentleman and masterwort among them.

Although a member of the Apiaceae family (still thought of by most gardeners as Umbelliferae) the plant is not another cow parsley and in fact bears little resemblance to a typical umbel. The true flowers are tiny and insignificant but are crowded together in a dome-shaped head, like countless pins in a pincushion, surrounded by a circular parchment-like bract to give the whole the appearance of a star-like flower (hence *Astrantia*).

The colour is a somewhat unusual combination of pink, green and white, nothing spectacular, but combined with their rather curious appearance,

astrantias are always the subject of comment, closely examined by visitors to the garden and highly prized by flower arrangers who appreciate how well the unusual flowers last in water and how easy they are to dry for dried flower arrangements (cut the stems before the seed sets, then turn the flowers upside down to dry in a cool, airy place).



Dark-red forms are much in demand and highly sought after - a sure sign that a plant has 'arrived'.

The 'Hadspen Blood' variety

introduced by Nori Pope of Hadspen House, keeps the freely flowering masterwort trait, but couples this with sultry dark red flowers surrounded by near black bracts. The palmate leaves are dark green with almost imperceptible black margins. To achieve the best colouration always plant

***Astrantia major* 'Hadspen Blood'** in moist soil in full sun.

Another outstanding dark-red form ***Astrantia major* 'Ruby Wedding'** has brilliant ruby red, pincushion flowers with a suggestion of white at the base of each petal, and a very long flowering period, from May until autumn.

The variegated form ***Astrantia major* 'Sunningdale Variegated'** has eye-catching, boldly splashed cream and yellow foliage in spring and early summer, making it a wonderful contrast alongside emerging primulas and flowering hellebores, and later on, lady's mantle and various grasses.

The variegation becomes less pronounced as summer progresses, but a second flush of bright new growth can be encouraged by pruning back existing foliage in July, after flowering.

The plants needs to be in full sun to get the best out of its unique, striking variegation.

Astrantias are quaint, old-fashioned, easy to grow plants. They form attractive clumps of lobed leaves, lying low to the ground, are good mixers, fit in anywhere and go with everything. Depending on variety and culture, astrantias grow to 2ft (60cm) or so in height, and spread 12-18 inches (30-45cm) across. They can be easily raised from very fresh sown seed, but selected named forms should always be propagated by division in the autumn.

SOME OTHER VARIETIES

Astrantia maxima A lovely, prolific astrantia with sprightly sprays of small chalky-pink flowers and greenish pink papery bracts in June. Height 1-2 ft (30-60cm).

***Astrantia major* 'Ruby Cloud'** is more a raspberry red, and a different toning from the other red astrantias, and one of the latest to flower, not opening the first blooms until well into June. The plants grow 20 inches (50cm) in height and clumps remain more compact than some other varieties.

***Astrantia major* subsp. *involucrata* 'Shaggy'** This is one of the most sought after forms, with pale green and white flowers and enormous bracts. The first and second flowers are much smaller than the mature ones. 'Shaggy' needs 3, preferably 4, years to reach maturity and fruition, but is well worth the wait. Many gardeners are duped into buying its close relative *Astrantia major* subsp. *involucrata* the flowers of which are not nearly as dramatic as 'Shaggy'.

***Astrantia major* 'Snow Star'** is a lovely astrantia growing 24-30 inches (60-75cm) tall with large white flowers and green tipped bracts. Best in partial shade and moist, but well drained soil.

