

Pride of My Garden? The Happy Family of Allium

I knew there was a reason I ordered that box of different kinds of alliums from Brent and Becky's Bulbs (brentandbeckysbulbs.com) last fall. The poor box sat there and sat there, until the day before the first wave of Snowpocalypse 2008 hit Portland. My partner had had enough waiting for me to plant that box o' bulbs and there she was, in the cold rain, planting tulips and alliums for me all over the garden. Thankfully, she remembered to plant them in uneven numbers. I may be a lazy gardener, but that doesn't keep me from being aesthetically particular.

Her work has paid off. This spring, our tulips were delectable. Swaths of black parrot tulips lurked in the shadows, painted tulips danced through the garden. But following steadily on the tulips' heels came the real stars of this spring's garden: the alliums.

Allium is a huge family and one you're familiar with even if you're not a gardener: Onion and garlic are both from the allium family, along with leeks, chives and shallots. I can't imagine cooking without alliums; in fact, they're often referred to as the jewels among vegetables.

But it's the ornamental factor of alliums that has cast me under their spell. If Dr. Seuss created a flower, this would be it – a purple orb atop a long, tall green stick. In the landscape, they serve as punctuation marks in a sea of new spring green foliage. Long-lasting, they



hang out in the garden later than other delicate spring blooms. I imagine them perfect to create a pattern or rhythm in a modern garden seeking structure, and they're quite at home in a romantic cottage garden as well.

But honestly? I like them because they're just weird. They're like that wacky aunt everyone loves but you don't entirely know what planet she's on. (Wait. I think that's me.) The different varieties range from tight balls to exploding balls to huge balls to small balls. You see a theme here? Alliums are all about the balls.

Allium giganteum is always a top pick: The size of a softball and home to small purple florets, it reaches 4 feet tall in a good year. Pair it with a backdrop of a dark-leaved smokebush for a dramatic display.

A looser and starry-eyed version is *christophii*. This is the allium with star-shaped florets. I've been known to gaze at mine for lengthy periods of time, trying to better understand how such is architecturally possible. It gets about 2 feet tall, lasts for a good month



Allium christophii is an easy showstopper to grow in the garden.

at least, and is perfectly paired with hostas. Bonus? These allium multiply. I once had three; now we have at least five. Score!

But the real freak show of the alliums are growing in my garden this year; *Allium schubertii* is truly blowing me away. It looks like a spaceship, with different lengths of stalks in its flower poking out a foot or so in width. Pinkish purple, it's airy – but it seriously is the size of a volleyball. That's right – a pink spaceship volleyball on a stick in my garden. It only gets 1-2 feet tall, but I am so proud of it, my heart swells.

Even when the alliums are done bloom-

ing, you can still have fun with them. Let their stalks dry up in the garden and don't cut their blooms off. Carefully spray paint them with a surreal color of your choice – fluorescent orange is a good one – and trip out visitors who need to know about this rare and unusual plant. I've done it. It's fun. Alliums never let you take your garden too seriously, and we can all do well with that. JO

LEANN LOCHER gardens in her North Portland garden along with her partner, two cats, one dog, and as many alliums as she can manage. She's also the LeLo of lelonopo.com.

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