

NATIONAL PLANT COLLECTION®
of
Echium spp., & cvs.
from the Macaronesian Islands

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INTRODUCTION

Echium species are part of the *Boraginaceae* family and are widespread across Europe and parts of Asia with many coming from the Mediterranean area. The most common species is *Echium vulgare*, known as Viper's Bugloss because the seed is said to resemble a snake's head, while the bristly leaves (common to most *Echiums*) are said to resemble an ox tongue.

As members of the *Boraginaceae* family *Echium* share the characteristic of being an excellent source of nectar for bees and other pollinators, *E. vulgare* is grown in central Asia as a crop to produce honey. The Macaronesian Islands consist of the Canaries, Madeira, the Azores and the Cape Verde islands, which, because of their unique habitat, produce the biggest *Echiums*, including *E. pininana* (commonly called Tree *Echiums*) which can rocket up to a staggering 17 feet tall. You may have spotted these while on holiday in Devon, Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, though they can be grown throughout Britain where conditions are favourable.

DESCRIPTION

There are around 40 known species of *Echium*, all in shades of blue, pink, red and white with tubular flowers and beautiful protruding stamens. Some species, such as *E. wildpretii*, have flowers which open in an attractive spiral up the stem.

The collection consists of two basic forms, all of which should be considered as tender:

- Monocarpic biennials (dying after flowering)—*E. pininana*, *E. wildpretii* and *E. simplex*, which form one large spire of flowers. Though classed as biennials in the wild, in colder conditions they may take 3 years to flower.
- Shrubby perennials, such as *E. candicans*, *E. virescens*, *E. webbii*, form spreading branches smothered in smaller domes of flowers, which can make an excellent exotic plant for the conservatory. Most *Echiums* have bristly or spiny leaves and woody stems which form interesting bark as the plant matures. Many of the Macaronesian *Echiums* are endangered in the wild, some of them critically.

GROWING CONDITIONS

While there are hardy species such as *E. russicum* or *E. amoenum* the collection consists of *Echium* which are not fully hardy unless in sheltered spots, which, surprisingly, includes Scotland and places on the West Coast warmed by the Gulf Stream.

All *Echium* species need free draining soil as they hate wet feet, especially in winter, and a situation in full sun or part light shade though they do grow towards the sun so those in shade may develop bent trunks, but this can become a talking point. They can be grown in pots, in any general multi-purpose compost, the larger the pot gives

the best result, though they will still flower in smaller pots, and brought into a cold greenhouse (frost free) or a conservatory for the shrubby type. Left in the border they can be protected by fleece or something similar but not wrapped too tightly as this encourages damp, and the crown on monocarpic species may rot under humid conditions. In North Nottinghamshire, in a frost pocket, and having failed with other methods we dig up the plants in Autumn and over winter them in large pots. The generally held view is that this is not possible but in our experience and tested by other gardeners, if you don't panic and over water them, while they look very sad and droopy, they do recover and should then flower the following year. The monocarpic species may have bare lower stems and not reach their full height but still grow to 8-12 feet. If the crown of a monocarpic species becomes damaged before flowering it is quite possible that it will throw out side shoots creating a multi stemmed plant which gives the mature plant an exotic and attractive look.

PROPAGATION

Echiums can be raised from seed but most will take 2-3 years to flower.

The best time to sow is April-July and seed should be only lightly covered, preferably with vermiculite, and not over watered. In the wild the conditions are hot days/cool nights and constant heat could cause them to fail, so move into a cool position at night. *Echium* produce lots of seed, especially the monocarpic species, and in a mild winter they may germinate in the ground. If you collect your own seed be aware that the fruit is in the form of a nutlet containing four individual seeds, and it is advisable not to separate them as this could cause damage. Also be aware that cross pollination may produce variations in colour.

Cuttings can be taken from the shrubby species in late May/June, immediately after flowering. Cutting back into the green stem should produce side shoots for cuttings. The trick with cuttings is a careful balance of watering to avoid rotting off.

GARDEN USE

The large monocarpic species make a dramatic statement even before flowering, with large palm-like leaves that make an exotic architectural statement in any position. *E. pininana* with a towering spike of thousands of bell-like flowers is sure to be a stunning focal point. Two specimens in pots will frame a doorway turning it into a breath taking entrance. They also work well in a mixed border with complementary plants such as white cosmos, sweet rocket and verbascum.

The shrubs work just as well when they have reached a good height and look really good in a large pot. The annual cultivars such as *E. vulgare* 'Blue Bedder', 'Pink Bedder' (which is endangered in cultivation) and 'White Bedder' make a refreshing change from the usual bedding and are so much better for pollinators making an excellent addition to a wildlife garden. Try them in a hanging basket.

PESTS AND DISEASES

The usual suspects ---slugs and snails; caterpillars can cause severe damage, though it is only aesthetic and even if they devour the crown all is not lost; leaf miner doesn't harm the plant and the affected leaves can be picked off; aphids are not a major problem appearing only occasionally.

In humid conditions, especially in winter, *Echium* may suffer from botrytis so ensure there is adequate air flow. Due to their bristly leaves *Echium* do not as a rule suffer from damage by rabbits, squirrels, pigeons or deer, in fact in America they are often listed as "Critter proof". Apparently only goats and donkeys eat them!

All *Echium* varieties are considered toxic if eaten. The leaves and stems may cause skin irritation so it is advisable to wear protective gloves at all times.

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