

The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

ALSTROEMERIA

With its main centre in Chile (and a lesser secondary centre in Brazil), this spectacular genus, either placed in the Liliaceae or separated with Bomarea into the family Alstroemeriaceae, rivals Calochortus in California, not only in the variation, complexity and colours of its flowers but in its immense range of habitats within a limited area. In fact, with species growing literally from the Pacific seaside to elevations of over 3000m in the Andes, from the Atacama desert to the temperate cloud-forests of the South and on to the steppes of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, it wins over Calochortus in the latter respect. In general, the growth-cycle fits in with other late-flowering, summer-dormant groups, such as the aril irises or Mariposa section of Calochortus, though some flower even later, into August, greatly extending the bulb-frame season. While more species than *A. aurea* and the *A. ligtu* hybrids can be expected to prove good garden-plants, most will be best grown, in cool temperate regions, in a raised bed or bulb-frame. In pots, the tubers can be vulnerable to freezing, though the only one we have had badly damaged by our lowest winter temperature was coastal *A. pelegrina*. Others, even low altitude ones, did not suffer damage to their overwintering foliage in our unheated greenhouse. They do exhaust the soil quickly, however, and are best repotted annually. Ideally seed should be given a warm period followed by a cool period for germination. We have always found germination occurs at a reasonably even temperature between 5 and 10 degrees C (40-50F). Soaking seed in warm water for 24 hours before sowing, then placing the seed at the bottom of a domestic refrigerator should give the even 5C required, though we have always found conventional sowing in autumn quite satisfactory. It is difficult to differentiate between the flowers briefly and as with many Calochortus, difficult to distinguish some species until one 'gets one's eye in.' Enthusiasts find it quite easy to sort out most species on their foliage alone. As with so many genera, such as Narcissus, Erythronium, Dierama and so on, there appears to be the possibility of intergradations between members of each species-group, though we do not believe hybrids occur readily, if at all, in the wild, outside these groups. The names follow those in the meticulously researched 'Die Gattung Alstroemeria in Chile' by E. Bayer (1987). We are grateful to Dr. Bayer for her help over one or two problems we encountered.