

The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

COLCHICUM AND MERENDERA

We list seed from a very wide range of species in this diverse genus (or genera if you wish to separate *Colchicum* and *Merendera*) of corms in Liliaceae (or Colchicaceae if you wish to split this family) with over 50 species distributed from Morocco eastwards into Central Asia and the western Himalaya. Like so many summer-dormant genera, its centres of diversity are in the Balkans and Turkey. The species flower from autumn through to spring. Under glass, the flowers start to appear in late summer with us. Flowering is triggered by changes in the mean soil temperature, not by moisture, though obviously pouring cold water on them can lower the soil temperature. From summer onwards we shall almost always have a *Colchicum* in flower until spring is well advanced. The robust, leafy, autumn-flowering, garden hybrids, involving *C. autumnale*, *C. speciosum* and *C. cilicium* are familiar to most gardeners but they are all on a similar pattern and give little impression of the variation in the genus. Most species are best suited to cultivation in the bulb-frame or under glass in the UK, where the dwarfer ones can be fully appreciated. The lower altitude ones need a dry summer rest but some of the high altitude, snow-melt species do not appreciate being too hot and dry when dormant. Overall, however, they are not demanding plants and offer considerable rewards for comparatively little attention.

They are slower than some genera from seed and germination can be very irregular but they usually all come up in time and most grow on steadily without too much trouble. Ideally, seed should be sown from summer to early winter and germination usually occurs in spring. As with the juno and oncocyclis irises, seed can remain dormant for several winters, so always keep pots of old or partly germinated seed.

Nomenclature: There are two acknowledged authorities on this genus, which has always been regarded as a taxonomic challenge. Both of them have been a great deal of help to us over the years we have been collecting wild material and almost all seeds in our lists are from plants identified by them. Karin Persson, based in Sweden, has written the accounts of this genus for 'Flora Iranica' and the Greek floras, edited by Arne Strid. Chris Brickell, based in England, wrote the accounts in 'The European Garden Flora', 'Flora Europaea' and 'Flora of Turkey'. Like all experts they do not always agree. As Karin's work is ongoing and she is responsible for publishing almost all of the recently described species, we tend to gravitate towards her nomenclature. She merges *Merendera* and *Colchicum*, whereas Chris Brickell keeps them separate. British gardening publications usually follow the Brickell names. On purely practical and superficial grounds, we think it more sensible to keep *Colchicum* and *Merendera* together but the synonyms are given in brackets for those who wish to 'split' them. It is all just a matter of opinion.

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Further information: There is no account of this genus aimed at gardeners nor is there a complete botanical monograph. Many papers published by Karin Persson cover a wide range of species, especially those from Greece, Turkey and Iran. So, though plenty information is available in these and in the standard floras, it requires a little work to access it. For general reference, try 'The Bulb Book' by Martyn Rix and Roger Phillips, 'The Smaller Bulbs' by Brian Mathew (1987) and 'Growing Bulbs' by Martyn Rix (1983).