

# The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

## MUSCARI AND BELLEVALIA

These two genera in Liliaceae (or Hyacinthaceae, if you split this family) are similar in many ways and are often confused by both gardeners and botanists. To those of us used to dealing with seeds, there is no problem in distinguishing them, as the seeds of these two genera are absolutely distinct. There are also differences in their anther filaments and in the number and morphology of their chromosomes. Neither genus is currently fashionable with British bulb-growers, which is a pity as they include many beautiful plants, many extremely interesting plants and some which are quite a challenge for the skilled grower to cultivate well.

Both genera have a similar distribution from the western Mediterranean area eastwards through southwestern Asia to Tajikistan and Afghanistan. *Muscari* comprises over 30 species and has sometimes been split into 4 smaller genera: *Muscari* in the strict sense, *Leopoldia*, *Botryanthus* and *Pseudomuscari*. Subgeneric status is probably more acceptable for these groups and we include the appropriate subgenus in the description of each species.

*Bellevalia* with about 50 species has in the past been taken to include *Hyacinthella*, which is to our mind a most distinct, clearly defined genus. Even without the charming *Hyacinthellas*, there are some striking species, like *B. forniculata*. Many of the others, however, can be regarded as something of an acquired taste. To those of us who know these plants in the wild many have the added fascination of being among the most localized of species, occurring, sometimes in very small numbers, in very limited, disjunct habitats. Maintaining and distributing such species in cultivation is essential if they are to survive during the present period of habitat destruction and changes in land use.

Most species of *Bellevalia* and the choicer species of *Muscari* do not naturally increase vegetatively and raising them from seeds is the best way to acquire sufficient interfertile clones. Seeds are best sown from summer to midwinter. They usually germinate easily and grow on well in bulb-frame conditions or in pots under glass. Some flower quite quickly from seed. Only a few of the species we list are suitable for open-garden conditions in Britain. When a species is easily grown outside, this is mentioned in the description.

Nomenclature and Further information: We more or less follow the names used in the standard floras for each area involved, 'Flora Europaea', 'Flora of Turkey', 'Flora Iranica' and 'Flora of the USSR'. A number of species have been described since D.C. Stuart's work on the genus *Muscari* in the 1960's. There is no popular account of these genera. Some reliable information can be found in the 'The Bulb Book' by Martyn Rix and Roger Phillips, 'The Smaller Bulbs' by Brian Mathew (1987) and 'Growing Bulbs' by Martyn Rix (1983).