

# The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

## SCILLA and CHIONODOXA

The dwarf, winter-growing Mediterranean and Southwest Asian members, mainly belonging to Subgenus *Scilla*, of this complex genus in Liliaceae are among our favourite dwarf bulbs. The other species currently accepted as belonging to this genus are much more diverse than these. At present, several genera at one time included in *Scilla*, such as *Hyacinthoides*, the bluebells, and the South African genus *Ledebouria*, have been separated out conveniently. The remainder still comprises about 100 species and includes summer-growing bulbs from both South Africa and the Far East of Asia, varying greatly in height and appearance. The dumbed-down account in 'The European Garden Flora' is trivial in the extreme, covering only 17 species but having the impudence to provide an identification key to them. If only reality was so simple.

Gardeners are probably best advised not to worry too much about the names. Go along with the origins of the plants and their descriptions. Almost all the ones we list are charming dwarf plants, well suited to pot-cultivation. A word of advice from our experience of these plants in nature is relevant to growing some of them. The place to look for many *Scilla* species is in fissures on shaded boulders or cliffs. Many of them are relic plants which have found a niche for survival in the coolest available habitat. If growing them in containers, they will not appreciate being totally dehydrated and exposed to high temperatures when dormant. Such advice is more self-evident with those which grow in woodland conditions or at high altitudes as snow-melt plants. Seed sown from summer to early winter will generally germinate in spring and the little seedling bulbs of many will survive more satisfactorily if the container is placed outside in the shade rather than being dried out under glass.

These remarks are particularly relevant to *Chionodoxa*. Though we retain the name for the present, it is currently accepted that this small genus of montane, snow-melt bulbs should be included in *Scilla*. We occasionally have seeds from some of the true species, which are by no means as easy to grow as the commercially available stocks. We have many thousands of *chionodoxas* naturalized in our garden. The original bulbs have been obtained under a variety of names. We have come to the conclusion that, after many generations in cultivation, all are now either hybrids or more or less stabilized selections. We love them all but we leave listing seeds from this sort of thing to others.

Nomenclature and Further information: We use the names in the standard floras but we do not always trust them. It is not always possible to identify species from E.V. Mordak's account in 'Flora of Turkey'. Speta's publications probably get nearer the truth for the species with which he deals but have not been adopted by most other botanists. This is a group of plants destined to give taxonomists a nervous breakdown. Gardeners can just enjoy them for themselves.