

## ERYNGIUMS—ORNAMENTAL THISTLES

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The sea hollies are an interesting and wide ranging group of plants. They are natives of Europe, the Americas (particularly South America), North Africa, Asia Minor, and Eastern Europe, and while many are hardy, some species prove tender in the United Kingdom.

The genus has considerable ornamental value which is not widely recognised. *Eryngium alpinum* and *E. tripartitum* are perhaps the commonest, but only the largest garden centres would be likely to stock both.

The merits of the genus lie in the ornamental flowers and foliage. The long lasting thistle-like flowers are usually blue or purple and very striking in appearance. The flowers can provide display from June to October and are well suited to drying for winter display. There may even be some potential in their use as cut flowers. The foliage of most species is attractive and often sharp or thorny. The American species have evergreen, long, narrow leaves often forming a basal rosette, whereas the European species have rounded or lobed leaves and are more fully herbaceous. The plants vary in height from a few centimetres to two metres or more. Their main uses are in herbaceous or mixed borders with a few species suitable for rock gardens.

The failings of eryngiums are not many but need to be recorded. Some of the taller species may require staking and tying if they are to remain attractive throughout the summer. The genus is rather mixed regarding the ornamental value of the plants and even within one species there may be considerable variation. The taxonomy of *Eryngium* species is confused and this does not help in the selection of attractive and commercially valuable plants.

Eryngiums are easy plants to cultivate. The majority of species in cultivation are hardy and will grow best in open, sunny situations. They will thrive even in poor soils, so long as they are well drained, and they are tolerant of a wide pH range. There are no particular pest or disease problems connected with eryngiums and they are trouble free in cultivation.

The propagation of eryngiums is achieved either by raising from seed or from root cuttings. Seed-raised plants are inherently variable and do not have the uniformity and consistent high quality required for horticulture. The initial selection of desirable specimens, which are then treated as clones and only vegetatively propagated, will overcome these difficulties. The selection process

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will be very important and could include a range of desirable characteristics such as dwarfness, hardiness, flower colour, and the length of the flowering period. The subsequent propagation of the selected clones will involve root cuttings unless any attempt is made to use micropropagation.

The Lancashire College of Agriculture and Horticulture holds the national collection of *Eryngium* under the aegis of the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens. The college has an interesting collection of species, a number of which have potential as garden plants. The following plants are currently being grown outdoors in Lancashire on relatively heavy, silty soil with no particular shelter or protection: *E. ebracteatum*; *E. yuccifolium*; *E. tripartitum*; *E. aquaticum*; *E. giganteum*; *E. agavifolium*; *E. alpinum*; *E. serra*; *E. coeruleum*; *E. tricuspdatum*; *E. campestre*; *E. corniculatum*; *E. palmatum*; *E. planum* and *E. variifolium*.

A range of other species is held by the college but they are either doubtfully hardy or have proved difficult to propagate. Of the plants named above, the following are most ornamental and could well merit wider distribution in the trade: *E. yuccifolium*; *E. tripartitum*; *E. giganteum*; *E. alpinum*; *E. tricuspdatum*; *E. campestre*; *E. corniculatum*; *E. palmatum* and *E. variifolium*.

Such a list is obviously subjective and there are certainly a few *Eryngium* species not yet present in the national collection which are worthy of note, such as *E. spinalba* and *E. eburneum*. The recurring difficulties of the classification and nomenclature of the genus make for uncertainty when referring to particular plants and there is no doubt that a number of synonyms have increased the confusion.