

# The Early Blues

April 2003 by Joan Sargent

No, I am not going to write about how we all feel after this truly miserable winter but about how I feel about blue flowers, especially the early bulbs of Spring. Those of you who have been to Keukenhof in Holland will know what a welcome sight a carpet of blue is, we can't have the tulips but luckily for us many of the bulbs are not palatable to deer or other browsers.

The first and most electric blue is the tiny *Scilla siberica*, these prodigious seeders send up two-pointed leaves holding a little flower between them, they wait for the right moment to show themselves. They often bloom with snowdrops and aconite.

They are followed soon after by *Chinodoxa*, it's a Greek word meaning glory-of-the-snow, not as bright a blue as the scillas but welcome just the same. If you have planted these two bulbs together you will soon have a combination of the two, named *Chinoscilla*, toss some *Muscari* into the mix and you will soon have your own carpet of blue.

*Iris reticulata* comes in several shades of blue, wine and white, the one I like best is 'Harmony', they are all wonderfully fragrant and just one brought into the house will give off a violet-like perfume for several days. Like a lot of early bulbs you will have long lanky leaves to cope with after the flowers are gone. This should not be a problem if you have given thought to where they are going, under deciduous shrubs where they can be left to die down in peace is the easiest answer for those of you who are tidy gardeners. *Pushkinia* is another Squill, a little later and a rather wishy-washy blue, it's good for picking and does not spread as rapidly as *siberica*.

I wish I could say I have carpets of *Anemone blanda*, I plant some every year, soaking the little bulbs overnight and laying the sticks carefully in their holes, they always show up first the first year and then peter out so I replant every year. I am going to add some lime when I see them in the spring, as I think our soil may be too acid. The blue is pretty but the white is prettier and the pink not worth growing.

I must in all honesty say that I don't always do what I preach. Having got that off my chest I will make a plea to all of you who are looking for your early bulbs now to make note in your garden book where you want to plant more next year, exactly where, it is so easy to forget where they are and dig them up when you are working in the fall.

Getting back to *Muscari*, the grape hyacinths. I always force several pots and then when the ground warms up I tip the whole thing out somewhere I want to start a new patch. I still love the old 'Heavenly Blue' but will admit it is a messy bulb, sending its foliage up too early in the fall and hanging on to it forever in the spring. I have tried two newer ones, not quite as dark a blue but less mess and less likely to spread wildly. Both 'Valerie Finnis' and 'Christmas Cheer' may not be at our local stores and you will need to order them from a bulb supplier in the fall and plant them early. While I am on the subject, I think you always order that way, you get more of a choice, often better prices and more likely to find when they bloom...and this avoids the customer before you putting the bulb back in the wrong place.

As I write this today with warmer weather promised for this week, I can see the squills foliage and the white of the snowdrops and my gardening year has begun.

*Joan Sargent, a longtime member and master gardener who passed away in August 2012; wrote many gardening columns through the years for our newsletter. We are reprinting them again- this time with photos researched on the internet.*



*Scilla siberica*, Siberian squill or wood squill.



*Anemone blanda*, Grecian windflower, left and *Iris reticulata* 'Harmony', right.



*Chinodoxa*, left and *Muscari* 'Christmas Cheer', right.



*Muscari armeniacum*, grape hyacinths, the more well-known variety.