

Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 82

Scabiosa columbaria 'Butterfly Blue'

History

In the 1960s, Farplants' grower, David Tristram, saw an exceptional plant, 'Butterfly Blue,' in the botanical garden of Wicklow, Ireland. Tristram obtained cuttings and grew the plant in his Irish garden for 15 years. He moved to England and grew the plant in his Sussex garden until the 1980s. He showed the plant to an English nursery, Blakedown. Farplants and Blakedown then decided that 'Butterfly Blue' was the best plant to promote in their first venture.

'Butterfly Blue' is a member of the *Dipsacaceae* family; it is known as the pincushion flower and has the botanical name of *Scabiosa columbaria*. The Perennial Plant Association named it perennial plant of the year in 2000.

Description

'Butterfly Blue' is a short-lived perennial that grows in clumps. In ideal conditions, the plant can reach heights of 3'; however, growth does not normally exceed 2'. The plant has a spread of 3'. It is heavily branched and has greyish-green, hairy leaves. The basal leaves are lanceolate-oval and reach a length of 4 to 6" at maturity. The stem leaves are dissected.

The plant has a long flowering period starting in early summer and continuing until first frost. The lavender-blue flower heads, composed of numerous tiny flowers, are numerous and 1½" wide. 'Butterfly Blue,' a cultivar (which may be a hybrid), is the most popular form of the species.

Propagation

The easiest method of propagation is stem cuttings. Cuttings are placed under mist for a minimum of two weeks with a minimum temperature of about 20° C. Roots will form in about eight weeks, after which the cuttings can be transplanted into pots. The plant is ready for sale four to six weeks after transplanting.

Culture

'Butterfly Blue' grows best in average well-drained soil with a neutral pH. The plant grows best in full sun, but it can tolerate partial shade. Removal of spent flowers encourages additional bloom.

Water

Improper watering of the plant stops it from reaching its full height. Prior to bloom, the soil must be kept moist, with no standing water. As the plant matures, it can be kept slightly drier.

Uses

Dwarfing habit and lengthy bloom period make 'Butterfly Blue' excellent for groupings in rock gardens or as border plants. The sweet fragrance and various shades of blue are highly attractive to butterflies and bees. 'Butterfly Blue' looks great as a cut flower. The dried seed heads are attractive in floral arrangements.

Ted Hill, Class of 2006

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