

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

The hardy bells of campanula make a beautiful addition to summer's bounty.



Campanula comes in whites, pinks, blues, lavenders, and purples, with a stem silhouette that varies from bushy branches to a single spike—but all varieties bear the same distinctive, bell-shaped flowers. Photos at left courtesy of Farmers West, www.farmerswest.com.

and ships well, campanula is also being grown in South America—in Ecuador, for example, by Esmeralda Farms.

A floral champion

All three of these growers are currently growing the Champion series: 'Champion White', 'Champion Blue', and 'Champion Pink', all cultivars of *Campanula medium*. (A 'Champion Lavender' also exists, but production is limited.) *C. medium* is the classic campanula, also known as Canterbury bells. It is a staple of traditional English gardens and grown also by beekeepers, who use it to make a powerfully sweet honey.

About 300 species of campanula flourish in the wild, some annuals, some perennials, some biennials. They all share the common name bellflower, a clear reference to the bell-shaped flower heads (in Latin, campanula means "little bell").

The Muse series is another *C. medium*, with a wider color range that includes white, pink, violet, lavender and dark blue cultivars. "I used to grow a perennial campanula,

Campanula *Campanula spp*

Vase life
7 days or more

Number per bunch
10 stems

Availability
March through October

Colors
white, blue, lavender, purple, and pink

CUSTOMERS ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING new. At the same time, there's nothing quite as appealing as an old-fashioned garden flower. What's a florist to do?

Campanula to the rescue! Although it's a traditional flower that's very familiar to lovers of the English garden style, campanula (pronounced with the accent on the second syllable) nonetheless retains a refreshing novelty as a cut flower. It's a great recommendation for summer brides. It comes in colors that are popular for weddings: white, blue, lavender, purple, and pink. Plus, the individual blossoms can be used in corsages, lateral branches in bouquets, and entire 18- to 30-inch stems in large designs for the church or reception. When the whole stem is visible, campanula brings line value to designs; the slim, straight line of each stem, however, is softened with a graceful, airy

cloud of nodding bells.

"Novelty crops overall are making a comeback," says Will Stewart at Farmers West, where campanula is a fairly new crop. "What we've realized is that high-quality campanula is very hardy, with a good vase life." Vase life is variously estimated, but Will is seeing 11 to 15 days with good postharvest care, including changes of fresh water and flower-food solution in the home.

At Farmers West, campanula is grown under hoop houses; at Wollam Gardens in Virginia, Bob Wollam grows it in the field. "If you can grow good campanula, you can always sell it," says Bob. "One, it's beautiful; two, it's very long-lasting." Since it handles

Campanula persicifolia," says Bob, "which is beautiful but not very productive or reliable. So I stopped growing that a few years ago and I've since grown only Champion." Champion is an annual that flowers in the first year from seed and produces rather large and very beautiful cups. Bob seeds his campanula crop in December, plants it in March and starts harvesting in June. At Farmers West, in Southern California, campanula is available from March through July. From all sources, campanula can be found on the market from

March through October.

High-quality campanula, reckons Will at Farmers West, should have at least nine bells per stem, three apiece on each of three branches. "Our series throws four to five from seed and produces rather large and very beautiful cups. Bob seeds his campanula crop in December, plants it in March and starts harvesting in June. At Farmers West, in Southern California, campanula is available from March through July. From all sources, campanula can be found on the market from

While *C. medium* dominates the market, other species and varieties are available from specialty growers and Dutch suppliers. With



Campanula medium 'Muse Rose' (above) was launched in Holland in 2004, third in the Muse series that also includes white, violet, lavender and dark blue cultivars. The cup-shaped flowers are typical of classic *C. medium* or Canterbury bells. Photo above courtesy of the Flower Council of Holland, www.flowercouncil.org/us. Two other types of campanula may be found on the market with some frequency: *C. glomerata* (shown at left), with flowers clustered at the top of the stem, and *C. pyramidalis*, a slender spike. Both feature flowers that are more trumpet- than cup-shaped.



PHOTO: ANNELO SALO

care tips for campanula

- Purchase stems that have one-quarter to one-third of the flowers open. Avoid stems that have broken tips or discolored leaves.
- Remove bundle ties or rubber bands and remove lower leaves. Re-cut 1 inch from stem end. Treat with an ethylene inhibitor and then condition in a tepid floral food solution for one to two hours or overnight. To prevent damage to the individual bell-shaped flowers, do not crowd flowers into buckets.
- Some studies show that underwater cutting is beneficial for campanula, but be sure that the water is free from bacteria or other microbes.
- Store in a 38-40 degree F cooler with good air circulation to prevent botrytis mold from forming on the leaves and flowers.
- Campanula are heavy drinkers, so keep them in a solution of water and flower food until just prior to use in designs.

clusters of star-shaped flowers at the top of the stem, *C. glomerata* comes in lavender ('Caroline') and purple-blue. *C. pyramidalis*, with blossoms that hug a tall, compact, spikey stem, comes in white ('Alba') and lavender. Ask your local growers about other old favorites that are now being rediscovered, and becoming "must-haves" for brides-to-be.

Care and appreciation

Although the new varieties are generally hardy, campanula remains a soft-stemmed flower, which means it is vulnerable to the growth of bacteria that can block the stem. It is also sensitive to ethylene. Normal care and handling procedures—recutting stems, keeping buckets and knives and vases scrupulously clean, and using a flower food with an antibacterial agent—are sufficient to insure a long vase life.

In the language of flowers, campanula is said to mean "gratitude." Florists can be grateful for such an elegant, evocative, and graceful addition to the floral vocabulary. 🌸