

Dusty Miller 'Colchester White'

This shrubby perennial with luminous foliage and light pink blooms may become one of your new favorite plants

Jimmy Turner

I know what you're thinking ... dusty miller? Just another ho-hum annual. But let me tell you, 'Colchester White' isn't like any dusty miller you're familiar with. It gets 3 to 4 feet across and 3 feet tall, and it's perennial.

Actually, it's not really even that closely related to the bedding plant we commonly call dusty miller. This perennial is a member of the same genus as bachelor buttons, *Centaurea*. I fell for this plant the first time I saw it five years ago, and it has been one of the most popular plants in our trial garden and display beds at the Dallas Arboretum.

I love *Centaurea* 'Colchester White' mostly for its incredible silvery foliage. The fine-textured mounds of almost-white leaves are a wonderful accent to perennial borders or container plantings. The foliage is almost luminous on bright nights, making it a natural for all-white gardens. In spring, 1-inch light-pink, bachelor-button-like flowers appear at the end of each stem. Truly a plant for all seasons, it looks as wonderful in spring as it does mid-winter. This plant in many ways resembles another tough perennial, *Artemisia* 'Powis Castle,' but I've found it to be more mannerly in growth habit and the foliage is much brighter.

Plant 'Colchester White' in full, hot sun — it will not tolerate shade. This is a great plant for the hottest, driest part of your garden. Once established, it is exceptionally drought-tolerant. Soil must be well-drained, as this plant absolutely will not survive in waterlogged conditions. In clay soils, add some expanded shale to help drainage and to raise the bed.

After flowering, shear the plant back lightly to keep it compact. Never prune this perennial to the ground — it will not resprout. Its growth habit is more shrub-like than perennial, and it does not re-grow easily from older wood.

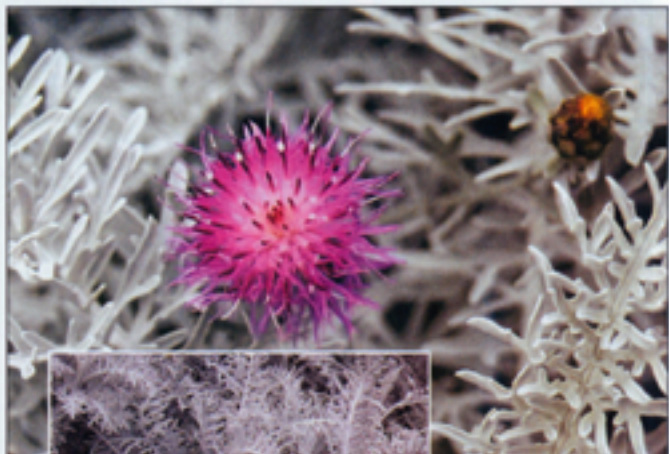
Combine 'Colchester White' with pink, purple and white-flowered perennials for an incredible summer display. The silvery foliage acts like a mirror to intensify the soft, muted pastel shades of other perennials. I especially like it mixed with *Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain' and the pale pink flowers of bouncing bet soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*). The growing requirements of this plant make it the perfect companion for perennial salvias and other tough, drought-resistant perennials. I also use it in containers during winter, mixed with light azure pansies and white violas as a stand in for ornamental kale.

Brighten up your garden this year with some *Centaurea* 'Colchester White'. Find it in local nurseries as 1-gallon or larger container sizes. ★

About the author: Jimmy Turner is Director of Horticulture Research at the Dallas Arboretum.



rising star



A drought-tolerant heat-lover, 'Colchester White' is just as happy in winter as in the middle of summer.

AT A GLANCE

Latin name: *Centaurea gymnocarpa* 'Colchester White'

Common name: Dusty miller 'Colchester White'

Flowers: Pink

Foliage: Bright, silvery-white, lacy foliage

Mature height: 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide

Hardiness: Cold-hardy to Zone 7

Soil: Well-drained

Exposure: Full sun

Water usage: Low

Sources: Local retailers or mail-order