

Pelargonium 'Calliope Dark Red'

Nothing satisfies that early-spring itch like a geranium!

Jimmy Turner

I'm going to share with you a little horticultural secret that all great gardeners know. "It's OK if some plants don't live forever, or even all summer." I know this may be hard to accept. I've even known some new gardeners to cry over the death of a petunia or marigold, but this is the true purpose of annual bedding plants — to make a huge flower show, then fade away. It's important to recognize that this or that plant may not be there all summer, but only in your garden as a temporary filler — what I term a "long-lasting outdoor floral arrangement."

We test several varieties of plants in the Dallas Arboretum Trial Program that won't flower all summer for us, but that's OK. They are beautiful enough to compensate for the limited time they grace our gardens. One of the most popular of these plants is the familiar geranium or pelargonium.

Although geraniums may not flourish as well for us as for northern gardeners, Texans can't resist them. The big, round orbs of bright red and other colors are traditional spring showoffs in our containers and gardens. Their true



Above: 'Calliope Dark Red' boasts true deep red blooms that are 4 to 5 inches across.



Above: 'Calliope' will become quite large, 2 feet tall and wide.

niche is late winter and the early part of spring, when we start having warm days, but a late frost is still possible. That's when the "garden itch" hits Texas gardeners, and we head to retail nurseries in droves. The one plant that is always waiting for us is geraniums, their bright flower clusters beckoning us to take them home. As many of you know from experience, they flower wonderfully through those cool days and cold nights, but when July hits, the flowers stop, and if the plants get too dry or hot, they die. But, as noted earlier, that's OK. Be calm, take a deep breath, and go get some lantana for the rest of the season.

If we're going to buy them, then we should at least know the absolute best ones. For that reason, we started a geranium test at the Dallas Arboretum Trial Gardens. Several years back, we discovered that the 'Maverick' series was one of the longest-lasting varieties in our trials, but that wasn't enough for us. We have continued to test every new variety that comes out each year, and this last year we ran across a new winner — 'Calliope Dark Red'. It is the first color in a new series of geraniums from Syngenta Flowers. This geranium is the beginning of a new generation of pelargonium breeding. It is the first commercial interspecific cross between zonal and ivy geraniums. Although the plant looks more like the familiar zonal geranium, the flowers are a true deep red that immediately grabs your attention. 'Calliope' also benefits from the hybrid vigor of its parentage and is exceptionally strong, quickly getting 2 feet tall and wide. This is one big geranium, so it doesn't take many to fill up a pot or basket! The flower clusters look like regular geranium flowers at 4 to 5 inches across, and they are somewhat semi-double. The extra vigor keeps this plant growing and blooming long after others have gone to the compost pile. Those in our trials made it to September and looked wonderful; that was seven months of continuous blooming they gave us!

Culturally, 'Calliope' has the same requirements as all geraniums. They must have well-drained soil. Some of us feel that all geraniums should go in containers around the yard so that drainage won't be much of a problem and the soil pH will be fine, no matter your locale. If you *must* plant them in the ground, then you will have to have sandy loam, or you will need to amend your sticky clay beds with expanded shale and compost. I've found this plant grows best in full sun in early spring, but as the summer heats up, I recommend moving the pots to where they receive a little afternoon shade to extend their lives.

'Dark Red' is the first color in this new series; watch for even more flavors of this luscious plant coming soon. Even though geraniums may only be "garden pacifiers" for us in spring, you might as well buy the best, biggest and brightest this year. 'Calliope Dark Red' is a winner in our garden, one that lasted through the heat and continued flowering. Once you see the flower color of 'Calliope Dark Red', you, too, will have a whole new favorite geranium this spring! ★

About the author: Jimmy Turner is the director of research and garden designer at the Dallas Arboretum. Visit <http://www.dallasplanttrials.org/> for information on the trial program.

AT A GLANCE

Latin name: *Pelargonium* hybrid 'Calliope Dark Red'

Common name: Calliope geranium

Plant type: Early spring annual

Blooming season: Early March until early July

Flowers: 4- to 5-in. globes of true deep red

Foliage: Mounding

Mature height: 2-½ ft. tall and wide

Spacing: 18 in.

Hardiness: Annual

Soil: Well-drained

Exposure: Full sun to light afternoon shade

Water usage: Medium

Sources: Local nurseries

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