



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## **Pincushion Flower: Love at First Sight!** (June 13, 2020)

by Penye Cushing, UCCE Master Gardener

Love at first sight!

I first met Scabiosa at the discounted plant rack. It had a few lavender-blue flowers with a ferny leaf. I thought it was pretty and brought it home, as I am always looking for blues in my flower bed. That was my lucky day! When home I looked up Scabiosa – and was delighted to learn Scabiosa's common name is "Pincushion flower," as the center resembles a pincushion and the stamens in the center resembles tiny pins. Pronounced scab-ee-OH-sah, the flower language states this plant symbolizes love, purity and peace. So sweet, makes me think of May Day baskets and doilies.

They are one of those old-fashioned, free-flowering plants right at home in a cottage garden. The flowers are prized as a cut flower and are easy to grow in well drained, sunny positions. Delicate appearing and full of charm, they add special colorful movement as garden plants. Scabiosa flowers are excellent cutting flowers for arrangements as a filler or on their own in your vase.

*Scabiosa columbaria* 'Butterfly Blue' is one of the most popular cultivars. The family Caprifoliaceae contains the genus *Scabiosa*, as well as other ornamental flowers like honeysuckle and weigela.

Scabiosa is a small evergreen plant, so it's best to use them in masses to prevent them from being obscured by taller species. They are ideal for informal mixed border plantings where they are often seen with butterflies swarming around their blossoms. They have 2" flowers on neat foliage, so it is also possible to use them alone - to form a border along the edge of a path or lawn. The flower stems raise 12-15" high to allow these beauties to dance in any breeze. Because of its diminutive nature, Scabiosa can even be a rock garden plant. Though it really starts to put on a show in May, mine bloomed all summer, sporadically throughout all the mild winter and hasn't slowed down yet!

Scabiosa are easily grown in average, medium, well-drained soil in full sun. It appreciates part afternoon shade, particularly in the hot summer climates of our central valley. Prefers light soils with neutral pH. Intolerant of wet soils, especially in winter. Remove spent flowers to encourage additional bloom. Scabiosa is not bothered by pests or disease, except in the case of plants weak from being planted in too much shade or in an area with poor drainage. Then watch for aphids and whiteflies. Powdery mildew may occur.



Mature plants are about a foot in diameter and 3 inches tall. *These lovelies* may produce 20 to 50 blooms, each held individually on thin stems. When in bloom, the plants average an airy foot in height. Provide pincushion flowers with an inch of water while they're establishing their root systems. After that, the plants can tolerate periods of drought. Since deadheading is laborious on plants that have so many small flowers on individual stems, you can shear the plant in midsummer when the blossom output is low to encourage a new flush of blooms in early fall. Pincushion flowers are light feeders; a bimonthly feeding with a balanced fertilizer like worm castings during the growing season will keep the flowers coming.

Every few years, it's helpful to divide established patches of Scabiosa. Dig out six-inch clumps with a spade and transplant them to a new location. Fill in the holes left with fresh planting soil, so the remaining plants can grow into it.

If you have hard heavy soil, don't fight it; make pincushion flowers the star of your garden by edging your rock garden or perennial flower border with alternating pink, white, and blue pincushion flower plants. If you need an easy blue flower to pop against orange or yellow companion flowers like coreopsis or lantana, try my favorite 'Butterfly Blue' Scabiosa. Other colors to look for include Black Knight--a burgundy flower with white stamens that are very striking paired with green or white flowering companions; or Pink Mist, with clear pink flowers that look so feminine in your fairy garden.

One of the many virtues of the plant is that it is even resistant to being browsed by deer. With such a wide range of colors to choose from and virtually nothing to worry about in terms of pests and disease, it's hard to go wrong with Scabiosa. They also make a long-lasting cut flower--a great way to show your feelings to someone special.

**In accordance to the Shelter-at-Home guidelines, the Master Gardeners have cancelled all public events at this time, but if you leave a message on our phone lines, we will get back to you!**

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