

# Pelargonium and Geranium

What's the difference?



Pelargonium flowers and leaves

The plants that we commonly call 'geraniums' were introduced to Europe by Dutch traders who brought them from South Africa in the early 18th century. These plants resembled the wild geraniums already growing in Europe, botanists mistakenly grouped them together into the same genus *Geranium*. When it was later discovered that these new geraniums differed from the wild European geraniums in the shape of their petals, the number of stamens and other factors, they were reclassified



Geranium cranesbill

under *Pelargonium*, meaning 'stork's bill' – a reference to the long, sharply pointed shape of their seedpod. However, the original common name stuck, and we still say 'geranium' when we actually mean 'pelargonium'. This wasn't so much of an issue back when gardeners grew mostly pelargoniums, when you used the word 'geranium', everyone understood you, but for the last 40 years or so, true wild geraniums have become popular in temperate climate gardens, to distinguish them from pelargoniums, we took to calling them 'hardy/wild/cranesbill geraniums' and pelargoniums have begun to be called pelargoniums or peggies by the general gardening community. Of course, the two genera *Pelargonium* and *Geranium* are closely related; both belong to the same plant family *Geraniaceae*, and both have the same long, narrow, beak-shaped seed capsule which their botanical names refer to, *Pelargonium* from the Greek *pelargos* for stork, hence stork's bill and *Geranium* from the Greek *geranos* for crane, hence crane's bill.

True geraniums, often called cranesbill, wild or hardy geranium, are mostly found growing naturally in the east Mediterranean and other temperate regions. The flowers are small and come in a wide range of colours from deep purple blue to pale whitish pink, most are suffused with darker veins, a distinct characteristics of true geraniums. The leaves are round in outline, usually five-lobed and indented nearly to the base of the leaf. Plants can be as short as 10cm or as tall as 60cm, some are spreading ground covers, ideal for rock gardens and borders. A few compact species and hybrids are suitable for containers. There are some 400 species, but only about 30 are cultivated and available to home gardeners. The plants bloom in late spring to early summer, and are easily propagated by division or stem cuttings.

Geranium flower is suffused with dark veins, petals are symmetrical



As for pelargoniums, all up, there are around 280 species, the plants can be perennials, sub-shrubs, shrubs or succulents. There are three major types:

Ivy-leaved pelargoniums have leaves that look like English ivy, the plants have a wonderful trailing habit, which makes for a good groundcover or spilling over embankments and the tops of big pots; their flowers often have intricate patterning.

Zonal pelargoniums, these plants are really about foliage, the name derives from the zones or bands of colour in their leaves.

Regal pelargoniums develop a shrubby habit in the garden and are more upright growing; their real feature is the spectacular flowers which makes them great in pots, courtyards and garden beds. In recent years, plant breeders have created a new class of pelargonium by crossing ivy-leaved with zonal types, said to provide new forms and colours as well as better performance.



Geranium leaves are varied green and have deeply divided margins

For many of us, the name geranium conjures up pictures of borders, hanging baskets and clay pots filled with brilliant coloured blossoms. In actual fact, these plants are not true geraniums at all, their botanical genus name is *Pelargonium*, their common name is pelargonium (more recently shortened to 'peggy').

The difference between geraniums and pelargoniums is quite simple:

The leaves: There are more varieties of shapes and colours of pelargonium leaves, the oval or round ones have a noticeably wider leaf base, the leaf margins are scalloped or lobed. Some leaves have a distinctive smell when rubbed or pressed, and in many cultivars the scents are quite aromatic. Geraniums leaves on the other hand have deeply divided leaf margins and the colour comes mainly in variations of green.

Pelargonium leaves come in many varieties of shapes and colours



The flowers: Geranium flowers have five similar petals; pelargonium flowers have two upper petals which are different from the three lower petals, but this characteristic has been bred out of many modern pelargoniums, some now has symmetrical flowers, with all five petals being identical. Investigation

of the sepals will reveal two interesting differences: pelargonium has one noticeably longer sepal which contains a nectary gland, whereas geranium has nectary glands at the base of each sepal. The apex of the sepals of geranium have a point, the length of this point can aid identification.

Classic asymmetrical pelargonium petals



Pelargoniums are mainly found growing naturally in a range of habitats from mountains to deserts in the southern regions of Africa, the genus also extends to northern and eastern parts of the African subcontinent, the Middle East, Turkey, Australia and New Zealand. In cultivation, they are tough plants that can provide a big splash of colour for minimal effort, they rank as one of the highest number of potted flowering plants sold. Other than being grown for their beauty, some species are important in the perfume industry. Some are used for flavouring food. Pelargonium oil is considered a relaxant in aromatherapy. In herbal medicine, some species are used in South Africa, mainly for digestive, bronchial and skin problems.