

# Ringling all the bells!

Versatile campanulas will work everywhere, from the back of borders to hanging baskets

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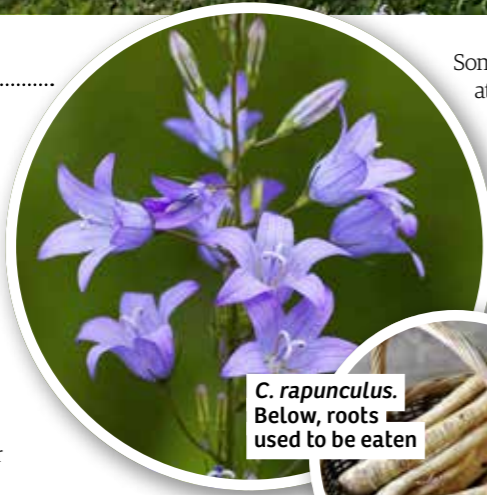
Campanulas, or bellflowers, come in a range of heights, from ground-level scramblers to tall and stately back-of-the-border favourites. There are more than 450 species, so there's bound to be one or two that will fit into spaces in your garden borders, containers or even hanging baskets, as well as cascade over low walls or cover the ground.

## All you need to know

● The Latin name, *campanula*, means little bell and it describes so well the flower's bell-like shape.

Although mainly bell- or star-shaped, they come in varying shapes and sizes, with some having long, tubular, bell-shaped flowers and others that resemble a cup and saucer. Flowers are usually blue but can also be pastel pink to mauve, sky blue and pristine white. They rise up the stems of border campanulas, opening over a long flowering period.

Campanulas come in a range of pinks, whites and purples



*C. rapunculoides*. Below, roots used to be eaten



Some are clustered like a bouquet at the top of the flower stem, and the creeping, scrambling forms flower along the stems at ground level.

- Generally they do well on most soils, will thrive in sun or shade, although they don't tolerate extreme heat well.
- The plants vary

in height from more than 1m (3¼ft) tall to barely off the ground, and some of the low-growing campanulas are perfect for spilling from containers or over walls.

- Once established, the narrow, tuber-like roots spread to make clumps or they self-seed through the border. Cutting back the flower heads after flowering will control

*Campanula rotundifolia*



Control spread by cutting flowered stems back

Did you know? Campanulas have sticky white sap – a nuisance but is not likely to cause harm

Did you know? Some species have been popular in gardens since medieval times, with Elizabethan gardeners fancying *C. glomerata*, or clustered bellflower, with its upright stems and flowers carried at the top of flower spikes in a packed bouquet-like formation

the self-seeding. And, of course, the seedlings are easy to recognise in spring, so you can weed them out if they're in the wrong place.

- Although they spread, most are not invasive. The most invasive is *C. rapunculoides* or *C. rampion*, which was once cultivated for its edible, radish or turnip-like roots.

The young leaves were also useful in salads. Mrs Beeton described it as 'an esculent' that could be eaten like radish. In her book, *A Modern Herbal* (1931), Maud Grieve describes how rampion was used and grown. It's fallen out of kitchen garden use and has become more useful as an ornamental cottage garden plant.

- All campanulas will set seed and self-sow. To control spread by self-sowing, cut the flowering stems back once flowering is over and your reward will be a further flush of blooms.
- Harebells or Scottish bluebells (*Campanula rotundifolia*) are the simplest, with delicate nodding bells, often found in hedgerows and meadows.

## Tall border beauties

### *C. medium*

With wide, open, bell-like flowers and strappy, peach-like leaves, *C. medium*, known as Canterbury bells and sometimes Coventry bells, is a cottage garden favourite. Its flowers in blue, white or pink open randomly up the stem, facing outwards and appearing to dance in the air high above the low rosette of foliage.

### *C. medium*

'Calycanthera' is semi-double as the calyx part of the flower, usually green, has taken on the same colour, making the flower seem like a cup-and-saucer.

### *C. persicifolia*

Very similar is *C. persicifolia* or peach-leaf campanula, with varying shades of blue or white flowers. This does well in light shade and flowers in June and July.



### *C. trachelium*

The nettle-leaved bellflower has been in garden cultivation since at least the 16th century. It was also given the common name of throatwort, with *Gerard's Herbal* noting the suggestion that a decoction of the roots was useful as a gargle for mouth and throat infections. Another common name for this campanula is bats-in-the-belfry.



### *C. pyramidalis*

This has flower spikes of up to 1.2m (4ft), tapering into a pyramid shape. It's also known as steeple bells or chimney bells, as pots of it were often taken into the house in spring and summer to light up the hearth of the unused fire.



### *C. lactiflora*

A variety that offers a more crowded flower head, with small flowers clustered in a branching, conical shape. It has a relaxed appearance and can be top heavy, so may need staking. With blue or pink flowers, it's a useful cottage garden plant.



### *C. takesimana*

The Korean bellflower, as it's commonly known, has arching stems and long, tubular-shaped bell flowers, that are flushed pink with white on the inner part of the flower. It also has spreading rhizomatous roots.



*C. punctata*

## Worthy of mention...

Also spreaders with tall flowering stems and tubular bells are *C. latifolia*, with dark, deep blue flowers, and *C. punctata* (spotted bellflower) with pink-flushed flowers. Due to their vigorous roots, both *C. takesimana* and *C. punctata* may be invasive in the garden; they and *C. latifolia* may need staking.



*C. latifolia*

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## Dazzling displays

The tall stems of most herbaceous campanulas are great for informal, country-style indoor flower arrangements. Pick stems before they're pollinated (when just opened), as they'll last longer. To condition them and stop the milky sap running, as the stem ends, dip them into a jar of boiling hot water for about 20 seconds.



## Top trailers

*C. isophylla* is one of the loveliest trailing forms. It's sometimes called Star of Bethlehem or Italian bellflower. It sends out long, trailing stems and has star-like, open-faced flowers that will arch over the rim of containers or tumble down from hanging baskets, giving rise to yet another common name, falling stars. It flowers over a long period in summer but is tender so needs winter protection indoors or in a greenhouse.



*C. portenschlagiana*

## Great for ground cover

These are mainly alpine and thrive in raised, well-drained soil and containers, and will often colonise pavements and walls, clinging on with their root hairs to precarious positions. They cover the ground making a mat-like covering and, when they're in flower, hardly a leaf is visible as the flowers make such a good show. Cut them back hard after flowering, feed and water. Divide the clumps every second year in spring or autumn to keep the plant growing strongly.

● *C. portenschlagiana* (Dalmation bellflower) will grow in shade



*C. carpatica*

as well as sun and forms a good clump of pretty, heart-shaped leaves, spreading to 50cm (2¼ft). It has deep purple flowers.

● *C. carpatica* (Carpathian bellflower) has white, blue

**Did you know?**  
The character Rapunzel in Grimm's nursery story was named after the common name of *Campanula rapunculus*, and that the plot revolves around the theft of rampions (another of its common names) from a magician's garden



*C. poscharskyana*

or purplish bells that face upwards from the dense mat that the plant forms.

● *C. poscharskyana* (Serbian bellflower) will cover ground well or may grow up against low walls.



## Propagating

- Species and named varieties are best divided in spring or autumn.
- If you're starting from scratch, sow seed in spring into a cold frame and then plant out when seedlings are established.
- Low-growing, mat-forming alpines should be sown into a cold frame from July to August when the seed is just ripe and fresh.