

Happy Wanderers Falling for Verbascums

by C.L. Fornari

IF YOU ARE THE TYPE OF GARDENER who likes reliability, these may not be the best plants for your garden. Those who want to put a plant in place and have it remain in one location might be annoyed by this genus's tendency to wander. But if you like an element of surprise in the landscape, or appreciate how nature can often position the perfect plant in just the right spot, you'll love the verbascums.

I call these "exclamation point plants." In gardens commonly filled with the rounded forms of shrubs, perennials, and annuals, thin, upright plants like verbascum can make the design come alive. They add visual contrast and the excitement provided by the unexpected. In addition to their form, the pollen-rich verbascum flowers are foraged by several species of bees.

There are over 350 species of verbascum, most native to Europe and Asia. In large, they are biennials or short-lived perennials, which is why they tend to wander in gardens. They are also prolific self-seeders, so even if they don't live long, once you grow



I have planted 'Banana Custard' and *V. olympicum* in this garden. The shorter plants here have self-seeded and could be either one or a hybrid of the two. The tallest, branched plant is typical of *V. olympicum*.

them, you're likely to have verbascum in your landscape forever.

Verbascum grow best where they receive at least five hours of direct sunlight. As a group they are drought-tolerant and will grow in a wide range of soil types, but require good drainage or a sloped site where there will be no standing water. Most verbascum will grow in rock gardens, and have deep taproots that grow down into gravel, clay, or other poor soils.

Many verbascum seeds require light for good germination. This is useful to know when the gardener wants to have some control over the amount of plants that are allowed to grow in a landscape. Not all verbascum self-seed prolifically, but for those that do, it's helpful to have a measure of control over their germination. When you want more plants in the garden, wait to mulch later in the summer or fall. But where fewer plants are desired, applying a 2" layer of mulch early in the spring will suppress seed sprouting.

For Some, A Weed

That said, studies have shown that the most widely known variety of verbascum in North America, *Verbascum thapsus*, is one species that will happily germinate in light or darkness. Commonly called mullein, this ability to sprout in assorted conditions has likely helped contribute to the spread of this plant. Similar to many naturalized weeds, mullein establishes quickly in disturbed soils. Since it's very tolerant of poor soils and drought, it thrives on roadsides, along railroad tracks, and in vacant urban lots.

Mullein is found in all fifty states and throughout the southern provinces



Banana Custard puts the flowers and visiting bees at eye level.

of Canada. It is so ubiquitous that some states include *V. thapsus* on their pernicious weed lists. But since it does not readily move into undisturbed areas, common mullein is not considered an invasive plant.

Verbascum thapsus has been utilized for a variety of medicinal, cosmetic, and practical purposes for centuries. From its use in assorted tonics and cures to tallow-dipped, flower-stalk torches, this plant was so valued through history that its seeds were carried throughout the world. Thus the plant has traveled from gardens to roadsides and beyond.

This weed is easy to spot in the wild or the landscape because the foliage is extremely fuzzy and a soft silver-gray in color. The stems are a greenish gray as well, and the flowers a medium yellow.

Mullein 2.0

Gardeners who like *V. thapsus* but desire a more showy variety should look for a hybrid called ‘Banana and Custard’, a name that’s often abbreviated to Banana Custard. The flower stalks on this variety grow at least 4’ tall. The foliage is more green than silver, and the flowers are larger than those on *V. thapsus*. Bloom stalks are wider and well branched. In fact, once this plant is in full flower, the stalks often need staking because they become so top-heavy with blossoms and seeds.



Even in the shade of the house as the sun sets, *V. bombyciferum* ‘Arctic Summer’ is a striking plant.

Even more striking is *Verbascum bombyciferum* ‘Arctic Summer’ which has larger yellow flowers and fuzzy, white-silver foliage. This variety also grows to 4–5’ and is a biennial hardy in Zones 5–9. Grow this variety for a powerful two-year punch of dramatic foliage followed by flowers.

Beyond Yellow

One of the most widely available varieties of verbascum right now is *Verbascum* × *hybrida* ‘Southern Charm’. This cultivar is sold by many companies as both seed and plants. It is the result of a breeding program and was brought to market by PanAmerican Seed Company.

‘Southern Charm’ has become a popular plant for several reasons. The flowers look as if a watercolor artist was in charge of painting their petals. They range from soft peach shades to pale gold, pink, and lavender. All have fuzzy purple stamens that create a lovely, contrasting center of the plant. Because dark or light centers of flowers form a target for pollinators, these are often referred to as “the bee.” ‘Southern Charm’ has a purple bee that makes the charming flowers even more eye-catching.

The main appeal of ‘Southern Charm’ for gardeners are the flowers, of course. But growers and home gardeners also appreciate the fact that these seeds don’t need vernalization for flowering. Although many types of verbascum plants need the plants to experience a prolonged cool period for flowering, ‘Southern Charm’ does not, so is likely to bloom the first year from seed.

Another reason for this cultivar’s popularity is that the plants branch out, providing several stems of bloom. Flower stalks commonly grow 2–3’ high and have become especially valued for cutting gardens. Where summer temperatures are warm, this verbascum tends to go dormant in the heat of the season, but often will return into bloom in the fall. ‘Southern Charm’ is hardy, although short-lived, in Zones 5–9.

Cottage Garden Favorite

Another verbascum with a dark center bee is the nettle-leaved mullein, *V. chaixii*. If you want to attract bees to any garden, use this plant. The species has dime-sized yellow flowers with purple centers. It is often described as “a true perennial,” but most gardeners find that plants typically live for three years. This isn’t a



When the verbascum are in flower I can hear my entire garden buzzing. At any given time, I can spot at least two species of bees working the plants.

problem because each plant produces hundreds of seeds that happily travel and sprout throughout gardens, paths, and gravel driveways.

Nettle-leaved mullein flowers heavily in the early summer and often reblooms in the fall. The foliage is green, not silver, and has a distinctive odor when handled. Flower stalks are typically 2–3’ tall, and can be single or branched on the species plants. There are at least three named varieties. ‘Album’ has a variable growth pattern similar to the species, but with white flowers. ‘Sixteen Candles’ is a yellow-flowering cultivar that is highly branched, and ‘Wedding Candles’ is also multi-stemmed with white petals.

Using these plants in a landscape successfully requires regular



Verbascum chaixii can be prolific in the garden. Some years I leave many to flower and cut them down as the blooms fade, while other years I edit more out early in the season.



I have grown 'Sixteen Candles' and 'Album' among the straight species *V. chaixii*, and now I get several forms appearing in my garden.



Not all verbascum have yellow petals. 'Wedding Candles' is a white variety. Other selections come in shades of soft peach to pale gold, pink, and lavender.



These *Verbascum olympicum* self-seed in this area every year. They seem to like crowding to the front of the bed where the sun is the strongest. The plant typically grows 6-7' tall. This photo had already been in bloom for at least four weeks.

maintenance and a willingness to pull excess plants. Plants will need to be selectively pulled out every year or the entire garden will become a forest of verbascum. Plants that are growing in the wrong locations will also need to be pulled. But in my experience the most important task is to cut most stems back to the ground after flowering finishes. The seed stalks are not very attractive, and the more seeds that are left to mature and fall, the more weeding and editing will be required in coming seasons.

Going Big and Bold

Those who desire fewer plants, but like plants that put on a show, will appreciate *Verbascum olympicum*. As its name suggests, this plant is large.

Verbascum Sources

Here are a few selected sources that offer a wide variety of verbascum seed;

Thompson and Morgan USA
www.thompson-morgan.com

Chiltern Seeds
www.chilternseeds.co.uk

Plant World Seeds
www.plant-world-seeds.com

Many other seed sources offer assorted species and cultivars as both seeds and plants, so be sure and search on the specific type you wish to grow.

The foliage is felted, and the rosettes themselves can grow 2-3' wide the first year. Most plants flower the second year, but I've seen occasional rosettes of *V. olympicum* that continue to grow the second season and only come into flower during their third summer.

A *V. olympicum* flower stalk is worth the wait, however. Typically 6-8' tall and widely branched, this verbascum is in flower from mid to late summer. It will grow in Zones 5-9, and will be happiest in an extremely sunny and well-drained location.

Other Varieties

There are many other species and cultivars of verbascum. A quick search on the Internet results in dozens of seed sources, both in the United States and Great Britain. I have never planted a verbascum that I haven't loved, and there are many more that I look forward to being introduced to. On my property, they are encouraged to wander through the gardens, and I always look forward to seeing where they'll take root.



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Here is an example of a year when I severely edited the *Verbascum chaixii* so that when they came into flower, I had distinct and separate groups.