

Grape Hyacinths

Bob Brown

I like the ease with which grape hyacinths grow and their impact in the garden so I make no excuses for writing about them even though many self-respecting gardeners dislike them. None of the ones below will become a nuisance by self-seeding. One can always inadvertently spread them by digging them over in summer but the chief way they spread is by seeding. In the first year the recently germinated leaf is thread-like and escapes notice. By the third year it flowers and it's too late – it will seed again. Hybrids are mostly infertile or the structure of the flowers doesn't allow fertilization so self-seeding is eliminated. I love all those listed below. Make a note to plant some next September.

***Muscari azureum* 'Bling Bling'** Distinctive, really glossy - that is, glossy like glass. Dark blue flowers March to April, 15cm.

***Muscari* 'Blue Eyes'** AGM This jumped to my attention in the trial of "Little Blue Bulbs" at Wisley because of its remarkable colour which is remarkably bluer than the common grape hyacinth *Muscari armeniacum* but like *Muscari armeniacum* it's bombproof. Grape hyacinth foliage can look very tatty by flowering time because it appears in August and then overwinters. In *Muscari* 'Blue Eyes' the foliage comes up with the flowers and looks neat and fresh at flowering time.

***Muscari macrocarpum* 'Golden Fragrance'** This one is so good that a Dutchman Mr.de Goede has paid to have it patented, which means that I am not allowed to propagate it for resale - and it IS good. The strong perfume makes me stop and breathe deeply. According to my wife most grape hyacinths smell of cheap (Woolworth's) soap. This one has a sophisticated sweet rich musky fruity perfume. The flower buds are dusky purple and change to yellow as they open. They are held in a large spike and persist for a relatively long time between March and May. Even the grey-green foliage doesn't let it down – coming up with the flowers.

Muscari comosum There's a double form of this which I abhor but the delicate strongly coloured flowers of this, the single, are a delight to discover between April and June. It has loose heads of brown fertile flowers with a plume (a coma) of violet-blue flowers from similarly coloured pedicels on the top. It has been called a grape hyacinth with attitude. I appreciate the way it slowly spreads.

***Muscari* 'Jenny Robinson'** This has enchanting powder blue flowers with pale green sterile flowers at the top between March and May, 12cm. The flower is very similar to *Muscari* 'Valerie Finnis' but their value as garden plants couldn't be more different. *Muscari* 'Valerie Finnis' has narrow coiled foliage which comes up in autumn and burns and rots overwinter so that the flowers sit on what looks like a recently made compost heap. *Muscari* 'Jenny Robinson' has neat broad foliage which emerges with the flowers. It's sometimes called *Muscari neglectum* 'Baby's Breath' which is a synonym.

***Muscari armeniacum* 'Saffier'** This was bred as a cut flower lasting ages in a vase. If you pull the flowers rather than cutting them the stems can be over 35cm long. It's late to flower, maybe as late as May. The flowers have a constricted mouth which probably prevents fertilization and/or as a hybrid it's sterile and sets no seed.