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The spikes of big hybrid delphiniums highlight the Atlanta garden of Landscape Architect William T. Smith, ASLA. Photographs: Van Chaplin

Delphiniums Move South

It's a fact of gardening that we can't always grow everything we would like—the climate or another factor sometimes stands in the way. Yet thank goodness most of us try anyway. Gardening involves experimentation, and sometimes we beat the odds—or find a way around them.

That's how it is with delphiniums—grand perennials that need a cool climate. In the Middle and Lower South, we grow them as winter annuals in spite of the unobliging latitude.

"I knew that if I could trick tulips into thinking they were in Holland, I could trick delphiniums into thinking they were in Maine," exclaims Dr. Ed Givhan of Montgomery, Alabama, who grows delphiniums successfully. Dr. Givhan credits the late Ben Arthur Davis, author of *The Southern Garden*, with his success. In his book, Davis suggests starting your own transplants from seed to set out in fall. Dr. Givhan starts seeds in September and sets out plants in December. They bloom the following May.

If you'd like to try delphiniums in

your garden, order seeds between now and August. When they arrive, store them in the freezer. Around Labor Day, sow the seeds in a flat. Seeds need darkness to germinate, so keep

(Left) *Delphiniums can provide a shade of pale lavender not found in many flowers.*
(Right) *The bloom spikes hold dozens of little flowers and open from bottom to top.*



them covered with cardboard or something else to block out light. Remove cover immediately after seeds sprout.

When seedlings are an inch high, transplant them into 4-inch pots. You can keep the seedlings outdoors in light shade if you water regularly to keep them from drying out. Feed with a liquid fertilizer such as 20-20-20 with every second or third watering.

Plant seedlings in the garden from late fall until late winter. Choose a sunny location where the soil is well drained. Work the soil by tilling or turning with a fork and adding plenty of compost or organic matter. Also work in slow-release flower food at the rate recommended on the label. Space the plants according to the guide on the seed packet label.

In Conyers, Georgia, Bud Heist of Heistaway Gardens suggests pinching transplants back to about an inch from the ground when you plant. "They'll branch nicely and give you four or five spikes," he says.

The plants will grow during winter warm spells. In spring they take off, growing to full height in eight weeks.

You'll need to buy tall stakes to support the huge blossoms; Dr. Givhan has found that even dwarf plants get at least 3 or 4 feet tall; Pacific Giants, generally described as reaching about 4 feet, stretch nearly 7 feet in warm Montgomery.

After the flowers fade, gardeners in most of the South should pull the plants up. In the Upper South, where the weather is cooler, plants should be left in the garden to bloom again. There, they are perennial for at least two or three years.