

## Plant Evaluation

# A Comparative Study of *Platycodon grandiflorus* Cultivars

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At the risk of encouraging botanical vandalism, the plump buds of balloon flower almost beg to be popped. The inflated, nearly spherical floral buds give *Platycodon grandiflorus* its common name; however, its bell-shaped blossoms mark a familial resemblance to bellflowers (*Campanula* sp.) and lady bells (*Adonix* sp.). Winsome buds and exuberant blossoms distinguish stalwart balloon flowers in the midsummer border.

*Platycodon grandiflorus* is a monotypic species of the bellflower family (Campanulaceae), which is native to Asia where it is cultivated for medicinal use. Balloon flower is a bushy, clump-forming perennial, to 3 feet tall, but often troubled by floppy stems. Cultivars have been bred for smaller size and compact habits; however, variability can be expected since most cultivars are seed grown. Throughout July and August, the tumescent buds burst open to blue, pink, or white starry flowers streaked with prominent veins. The broadly campanulate, five-lobed blossoms, to 3 inches wide, are borne in few-flowered clusters at the end of the stems. Bluish green leaves, generally

oval with toothed margins, are arranged in whorls on the lower portion of the glabrous stems but positioned alternately at the tips. In autumn, leaf color changes to dark purple or a mix of light purple and yellow, depending on the cultivar.

Hardy balloon flowers are best in well-drained soils in full sun to light shade and are long-lived under normal conditions. Their stems emerge late in the spring and may be accidentally disturbed by impatient gardeners. Marking their location each fall can help guard against any digging mishaps come spring. Balloon flowers are easy-care perennials with few pest problems, although deer enjoy the succulent stems and flower buds. Staking is almost a requirement for taller cultivars or when growing balloon flowers in light shade. Seed-grown cultivars may exhibit variations in plant size and flower color. Balloon flowers perpetuate themselves in the garden through self seeding, which sometimes results in subtle new color forms.

In the border or cottage garden, balloon flowers are good companions to other summer-blooming perennials such as Shasta daisies (*Leucanthemum* sp.), yarrows (*Achil-*

uncertainty regarding identification; however, the plants of 'Mariesii' and 'Pumilum Album' were determined to be unquestionably incorrect and dropped from the trial.

Overall, the balloon flowers performed well, with 12 cultivars receiving four-star good ratings for floral display, habit quality, and plant vigor. Most cultivars produced an abundance of flowers over a long period, but