The first Anemone coronaria bulbs come into flower in February. The texture of the just-unfurled petals is as voluptuous as the best bearded iris and then there's the black centre, a cross between something you'd expect to find at the bottom of the sea and a liquorice all-sort.

This first flower is in a pot in the greenhouse and I've now moved it onto the kitchen table. These anemones are the earliest bulbs where only one is plenty. Snowdrops, aconites, even miniature Iris reticulatas all need several if not hordes to have an impact, but the flower of one of these anemones is so complex, and yet on first appearances so simple, you can revel in just a single stem.

How to grow Anemone bulbs

We planted these knobbly fat corms into their pots in September and it's usually around early February, that they first appear. That's inside, in a frost-free greenhouse. To get them off to a fast start, soak the corms in water overnight before planting. Rehydrated, they have a bit of give and they germinate and come into growth much more quickly.

They like a rich, loam-based soil in their pot. I try to go out and gather up a few molehills, and lighten the crumbly, but quite heavy clay soil we have in the fields with home-made compost and grit, about one-half soil, to a quarter of the other two ingredients. That seems to do the trick. Plant them shallow, in a pot with decent depth – they have quite a deep root run – placing them claws upwards, about 2in deep and about 4in apart. Water them well on planting and then leave them be, checking occasionally that the soil is not bone dry, but don't overwater. They'll rot if too wet, but need moist soil and will take 10 to 12 weeks from planting to flowering.

Unlike hyacinths, anemone bulbs don't need pre-chilling to flower, but they grow more vigorously if you chill them for about six weeks (at around 41F) once planted. I reckon that's about what they get over the winter in my greenhouse. They can have, but don't need, a spell in the dark, but once the leaves begin to emerge, bring them into bright light. To flower best they need good light intensity, and will sulk in a dull corner.

Which varieties to plant

This single 'Cristina' is the first of many coronaria hybrid anemones (formed by crosses between Anemone coronaria and other magnificent singles such as A. pavonina, A. hortensis and A. x fulgens). We have one or two pots of all five single colours, 'Mr Fokker' (deep purple-blue), 'Hollandia' (bright red), 'Sylphide' (deep pink), and 'The Bride' (white). These are all single De Caen Group forms, not the double St Bridgid forms. The De Caens are simpler and prettier, although I might even try the frillier doubles this spring.

As well as looking out for the single flowers, it is always worth buying the more expensive, named single-colour forms. The mixed colour bags, which you'll see in many garden centres and supermarkets, are often half the price, but include too many muddy, greyish colours, mauves and wishy-washy pinks, without the clarity and intensity that is so life-enhancing in these velvety texture named varieties. They're worth every penny.

Planting outside
After having the pots inside through February and March, we then have coronarias flowering outside under the step-over apples in the fruit garden. These bulbs are tougher than one thinks. The beds here are sunny, raised and well drained – exactly what these anemones ordered – and the corms have lasted, flowering right through the rest of spring, for four years despite frosts and snow in March three years running.

For most sites, these need to be protected from frosts and should therefore be planted out in the garden when all danger of frost is passed. They prefer a light, sandy soil in full sun and need to be kept dry during their dormant period. Lift and dry them every two years, then re-plant. It is beneficial to soak the corms for 24 hours in tepid water prior to planting.

In the past, we've planted these anemones in the autumn only, but last year we experimented with a later planting. A batch in the spring gave us wonderful colour and flowers to pick in the May gap when the tulips were over and the roses and perennials were yet to bloom, so we're about to do the same. It turns out you can plant these anemones whenever you want, which is, of course, what commercial flower growers do to give us a year-round supply. Put them in in spring for flowers in early summer, in early summer for autumn and in autumn for flowering now. They make great cut flowers and I love them in the garden for as long as possible, so why not go for all three?

Cut flower anemones

Picked, these anemones last two weeks if you keep them cool and put a drop of bleach in their water. Unlike most bulbs – or corms – if you pick one flower, another will emerge soon from exactly the same spot. The root seems to pump out flowers for months at a stretch.

At this time of year, use them in a zingy duo with the searingly bright hyacinth, 'Jan Bos', easy to force into flower around the same time, and then in a month or so, combine them in pride of place with wallflowers, euphorbias and a few snakeshead frillaries in a hand-tied bunch.

There's one thing left to say about these sumptuous performers: once in your lifetime, go and find them growing in the wild in short grass in the Omalos Plain in the White Mountains at the west end of Crete. You can walk through fields edged with dry-stone walls and come across wonderful patches of these multicoloured anemones, with finely cut leaves that look just like parsley.

Most of them are brilliant red, but there are pools of crimson, blue, magenta, mauve and white studding the grass on many of the field edges. It's an increasingly rare sight – a flower-filled paradise.
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