Silene Ingrami

West American Silenes

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The genus Silene is a large one, found both in Europe, in Asia and in North America.

There are a number of very good garden plants outside of the Pacific Slope, some of which I do not know but a few of which I can recommend. There is S. Schajta which while rather a dull rose in color, fully atones for any defects by flowering in the fall and being a very excellent rock plant when few rock plants are at their best. Most hardy and thrifty too.

Then there is S. maritima which makes a flat cushion of a pleasing light bluish green and has many white flowers. Its cushion is always fine either winter or summer and its flowers are not bad. It too, fills a distinctive place in the rock garden and it makes a fine drape over a wall.

The finest silene east of the Rockies is the Fire Pink, S. virginica which is a very pretty low growing plant whose flowers are crimson or scarlet and showy. It is one to two feet high and also an excellent rock plant. Whether S. Wherryi is a form of this or a species I do not know but it is a fine thing much to be desired and not too often to be possessed. Silene pennsylvanica is another very excellent Eastern species.

It is along the Pacific Slope that the genus is best represented and here there are eighteen species. Of
fourteen of these one can say, “pretty,” “interesting,” “neat,” and be within bounds but really none of these fourteen are of much garden value. That leaves us four, but that four are among the very finest of plants.

Before going into their descriptions I must give some general information on them and many other silenes.

They are often found in a quite pervious, well-drained and deep soil and the roots have peculiarities. The main root is a perpendicular rather fleshy tap root, three-sixteenths of an inch thick in fair flowering plants although as much as three-fourths inch thick in heavy old ones and it goes down from a foot to as much as three feet with many feeding roots at the base. It is a little hard to credit the depth to which these tap roots can reach but I have noted them in slides in road banks as much as five feet in length.

From the top of this tap root which is usually an inch to four inches below the surface, spread from a few to many slender tendril-like branches laterally through the soil, each of these terminated in a white bud from which the season’s growth and bloom will come.

Often these spread as much as two feet and one would be almost sure that there was a colony when in reality all can be traced back to one center.

Quite apparently it would be impossible to lift or to plant the full length of one of these tap roots and the practise is to cut them off about six inches long. This cut soon heals and many fibrous roots are formed to make a plant that may be more readily transplanted and in its permanent new home will gradually reach great depths.

From this description it is plain to see that the top of the tap root from which radiate the tiny tendrils of growth must be set at least an inch below the surface of the soil. My practise is to set the top of the tap root from an inch to two inches deep according to the size of the plant, spreading the tendrils laterally and upward so that the tips of the tendrils are just under the surface. I believe that all failures with these Western silenes may be attributed to the fact that they have been planted too shallow.

Our Western silenes, and it is true of many of our Western perennials, ripen after the end of flowering period and lie dormant until rain comes. If they are moved in late winter or spring after the growth starts they are apt to sulk but the dormant roots grow quickly and finely.

I dig the ripe roots and store them in pits in slightly moist soil and these stored roots handle very much like bulbs until late spring, but must be kept moist at all times.

Silene laciniata of Southern California makes a compact erect plant from two to five feet in height. The flowers are of fine form, beautifully laciniated in petal and a brilliant scarlet. It is similar to but not as good as californica which has equally showy flowers and is much more compact.

S. californica is found from the northern border of California down two-thirds of the length of the state, both in the Coast range and the Sierra Nevadas. It is always a plant of open woods and of loose deep soils. Often one finds it in ledges of broken rocks. This species will respond to a little moisture and remain green throughout the summer often flowering a number of times, and is a particularly brilliant plant in its late spring bloom.
The underground stems spread quite widely with many flowering stems which may either be in a small compact clump when in an exposed situation or with stems over a foot high and widely spreading in shade or in rocks. Its fine scarlet flowers are most showy and perhaps the showiest woodland flower in California. A splendid and showy plant and very drought resistant once it is well established.

*S. Hookeri.* I do not think that any one who sees *S. Hookeri* in a fine specimen will refuse to place it with the first few desirable rock plants. The underground stems travel far before coming through the soil and the stem above ground is only two inches high with from one to several flowers but there are many such stems appearing over a circle of from eight inches to as much as two feet across. The exquisite flowers are one and a half to two inches across, of a delicate soft pink with a contrasting white halo at center and the petals deeply and finely laciniate.

*Silene Ingramii* in Southern Oregon has only been known a very few years but has won commendation wherever seen.

Its general habit is that of *S. Hookeri* but the stems are taller, about four inches, the petals less cut and the color is a uniform deep pink. In its way is as lovely as *S. Hookeri*.

Either of these silenes should have an open pocket in the rock garden where the roots may reach deeply. As mentioned before the top of tap root should be set half an inch to two inches below the surface according to the size of root and the tendrils spread laterally and upward so that the tips are just covered. As they ripen up after flowering the pocket should be well marked to prevent injury during the dormant period.

*S. californica* or *S. laciniata* may also be planted in rock banks wherever there is a good pervious underlying soil into which the roots can grow.