

Getting to know the Leopard Lily

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The leopard lily is currently a popular plant choice for landscaping purposes. It is getting “over-used” in Singapore because the plant can be seen in many of the new and upcoming condominium showflats where they are planted en masse outdoors. Botanically known as *Belamcanda chinensis*, the leopard lily is actually not a true lily. It is a member of the Iris family, *Iridaceae*. Recent genetic analyses have revealed that the leopard lily is closely related to a true iris species, *Iris dichotoma*. Scientists have hence given it a new, synonymous scientific name, *Iris domestica*.

Left: Leopard lilies being grown as a living border at HortPark, Singapore.

The leopard lily is native to northern India, northern Vietnam, eastern China, Korea to southern Japan. It is admired for its spotted, bright orange flowers. This feature of the flower is probably how the name “leopard lily” was derived. The leopard lily is a spectacular bloomer and the flowers are produced in large, highly branched sprays that are proudly displayed conspicuously above the foliage. Only a few flowers open each day and each flower is not long-lived as they open only for a few hours daily. Fortunately, faded flowers are quickly superseded by newer ones that are produced on the inflorescence on subsequent days.

Upon successful pollination, the flower withers, which leads to the production of a fruit capsule. When the fruit capsule is ripe, it splits open to reveal a cluster of shiny, black seeds. The leopard lily is also known by another name, the blackberry lily. This name is probably derived from misconception that the black, round seeds are berries (berries are technically regarded as fruits).



Above: The cheerful, bright orange flowers of the leopard lily.

The leopard lily adopts a tidy, upright growth habit where its leaves are arranged in a fan-like manner on a stout central stem. Each individual leaf is strap-like and greyish green, therefore making the leopard lily a suitable plant that can be planted in a 'silver garden'. Healthy individuals can grow up to a height of about 60 to 90 cm. Growth terminates with the production of a flower stalk. The leopard lily is a rhizomatous plant where new shoots rise from the ground. With time, a small clump of several shoots will result from a single plant.

The leopard lily has medicinal uses and should be given a place in any medicinal plant garden. The dried underground stem has long been used medicinally in China to treat a variety of ailments related to inflammations of the throat and upper respiratory tract such as laryngitis, pharyngitis, tonsillitis, cough and asthma. Known as “she gan” (射干) in Chinese and sections of the dried rhizome can be purchased from Chinese medical halls in Singapore.

Culture

In terms of light requirements, the leopard lily can be grown outdoors either in full sun or semi-shade. The plant has been reported to be able to flower normally under both types of light conditions. It has been recommended to remove spent flowers (“deadheading”) to prolong blooming and prevent self-seeding.



Above: The round, black seeds of the leopard lily being revealed after the dried capsule splits open. (Source: Wikipedia)

The leopard lily prefers to be planted in well drained, moisture retentive and moderately fertile loamy soil. Plants grown under such conditions will attain a much taller height. They can tolerate sandy or clay soil and benefit from occasional light feeding with slow-release fertiliser pellets to promote growth and flowering.

The long flower sprays of the leopard lily are borne on rather thin flower stalks. These are prone to wind damage and it would be beneficial to provide some support by staking the inflorescences using thin bamboo stakes.

Outdoors, the leopard lily is best displayed as a colony of individuals and should be spaced about 90 cm apart between adjacent plants. The leopard lily can also be grown in containers by apartment gardeners, provided that there is ample sunshine that is needed for growth. A suitable location would be able to supply at least 6 hours of filtered sunshine.

Pests & Diseases

Snails and slugs can become a nuisance when they chew away the new, tender rhizome growth when they just emerge from the ground. Scatter some snail and slug pellets around the plants where these pests are prevalent, especially during wet weather. Spider mites, mealy bugs and aphids can harass the young leaves of the leopard lily and these pests can be eliminated quite easily using pesticides bought from local nurseries.

Crown rot can be fatal and is a result of plants being grown in waterlogged areas. The leopard lily is unlike some aquatic irises that are marginal plants. If drainage is a problem, the leopard lily should be planted in raised beds topped with a well draining soil mix.

Leaf scorch or burn can occur to plants that are grown in full sun. Leaves first start to turn brown and they eventually will die off if burnt. This problem can be minimised if plants are grown in partial shade. For plants grown in full sun, adequate moisture in the soil must be maintained, either by regular irrigation or application of mulch on the soil surface.

The leopard lily can suffer from various viral infections. Affected plants exhibit yellowish streaks on the leaves, yellowing of all the leaves or foliage deformation shown by downward curling or twisting of the young leaves. All diseased plants should be discarded at the first signs of the disease as there is no cure. Prevention is better than cure and gardeners should only purchase healthy plants from nurseries. One should also avoid growing the leopard lily in areas where viral infections had previously occurred.

References

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