



Green Culture Singapore Feature Article for December 2008

Published on 4 January 2009

• Text by Wilson Wong •

• Pictures by from various sources (credits given accordingly) •



Above: The cool blue flowers of the blue ginger are borne on a flower spike called a thyrus.
[Wilson Wong]

The blue ginger plant is a popular landscaping ornamental plant for the tropical outdoor garden. The plant is famed for its attractive flowers which are made up of three light blue sepals, three dark blue petals and six, bright yellow stamens. They are borne on a terminal flower spike which in bud looks very much like the one produced by a blue hyacinth bulb.

A much sought-after plant by tropical plant connoisseurs, the blue ginger plant constitutes one of the few plants that feature the cooler blue in its flowers. The floral colours of most tropical plants are more on the 'warm side' which include red, yellow and orange.

Native to Brazil, the blue ginger plant is botanically known as *Dichorisandra thyrsiflora* and it is not a true ginger at all. The common name, 'blue ginger' is a misnomer. It is a member of the Commelinaceae family (Spiderwort family) and its relatives include the boat lily (*Tradescantia spathacea*) and the wandering Jew (*T. zebrina*), which are common medicinal and houseplants that Singaporeans grow.



A difference in floral feature between the blue ginger (**left**) and a typical spiral ginger (**right**). Flowers of the blue ginger are borne on a spike whereas those in a spiral ginger they are found on a cone-like structure. [Wilson Wong]

The genus name of this plant '*Dichorisandra*' is derived from two Latin words, which in combination, refers to the two-valved structure of the anthers distinctive to this group of plants. The specific name '*thyrsiflora*' formed from the botanical term 'thyrsus' which describes a larger flower spike that this plant produces in the center than at the top and bottom.

The blue ginger got mistaken to be a ginger probably due to the close resemblance with a spiral ginger (*Costus* spp.). The blue ginger plant produces tall stems with leaves which are arranged in a spiral manner that is similar to the growth habit observed in spiral gingers. Although both the blue ginger and the spiral ginger do not emit an aromatic smell when they are injured, they can be easily told apart because of their distinct flowering habits.

Unlike a spiral ginger which belongs to the genus *Costus*, the blue ginger produces flowers that are borne individually on a flower spike attached to it via a distinct stalk. *Costus* flowers are produced on a cone-like structure of bracts and they peek out from a space between two overlapping bracts.



Similarity in growth habit between the blue ginger (**left**) and a typical spiral ginger (**right**). Because both plants have leaves that grow around a central upright stem, it is not difficult for a novice to confuse the two plants. [Wilson Wong]

For those who are familiar with Hokkien (a Chinese dialect) and do a bit of cooking, the name "blue ginger" may lead one to think that the plant is the greater galangal, which is botanically known as *Alpinia galanga*, a true ginger belonging to the Zingiberaceae family. This cooking ginger is a common spice that is used in this part of the world and the confusion arises because its Chinese name "南姜" is pronounced as "lam kiew" in Hokkien and its pronunciation sounds similar if one is to say "blue ginger" using the same dialect.

Culture

The blue ginger plant is best grown as a specimen plant in a shadier part of a garden to show off its elegant and cool-looking flower spikes. It can be grown inside a pot as well and apartment gardeners can give it a shot to grow this plant in their balconies, roof-top gardens and even their corridors!



Above: When well grown, the blue ginger makes a very good specimen plant in the garden.
[Forest & Kim Starr – Plants of Hawaii Website]

When it comes to growing conditions, the blue ginger prefers a location that is humid, cool and shady where is also protected from winds. The optimal location is where a plant can receive the gentle rays of the morning sun. Plants are easily sun-burnt and leaves become bleached if they are grown under direct sunshine. When growing in shadier conditions, the blue ginger plant produces leaves that feature silver markings and a prominent midrib.

Unfortunately, this plant is not floriferous under Singapore's tropical lowland conditions. One has to find the 'right' spot where the plant likes to grow in. Like spiral gingers, the blue ginger has a tendency to increase the length of its stems to reach out for light under low light conditions. Plants can vary in height from 1 to 2 m, under different light conditions.

During the cooler, wetter months at the end of the year, the blue ginger can be persuaded to bloom more generously. As long as conditions are conducive to blooming, the thyrses will continue to expand upward adding flower buds at the top.



Left: Blue ginger leaves that feature silver markings and a prominent midrib.
[Forest & Kim Starr – Plants of Hawaii Website]

The blue ginger plant grows best when planted in a fertile, well-drained soil mix that is also rich in organic matter. The roots of plants can be mulched on the soil surface to keep them cool and retain moisture. Its roots should be moist and not soggy wet.

The plant is propagated vegetatively the same way like what can be done with spiral gingers. A long stem can be cut into shorter sections with several internodes and these can be stuck into some well-drained soil placed in a shady and protected location like what is commonly done for propagation via stem-cuttings.

Large clumps can also be lifted from the ground and divided for propagation. Divisions should contain at least four stems and potted up individually in a well-drained mix. Tall stems can be trimmed to reduce the rate of water loss from the plant but some leaves near the base of the stem should be left on the plant. These leaves should be cut in half to reduce water loss but still permits the plant to make some food via photosynthesis.

The blue ginger is relatively pest- and disease-free. Common pests encountered include sap-sucking and leaf-rasping insects such as aphids, thrips and mealy bugs. Chewing insects such as grasshoppers do also bother this plant.

As long as a plant is grown in a well-drained location, it should not suffer from basal rot of the crown which can spread to stems. If this does happen and discovered early, cut healthy stem sections from the plant and proceed with propagation of new plants.

References

Clay HF, Hubbard JC, Golt R. The Hawaii Garden: Tropical Exotics (Hawai'i Garden). 1987. University of Hawaii Press.

Hardy CR, Stevenson DW, Kiss HG. Development of the gametophytes, flower, and floral vasculature in *Dichorisandra thyrsiflora* (Commelinaceae). *American Journal of Botany*. 2000; 87(9): 1228-1239.

Llamas KA. Tropical Flowering Plants: A Guide to Identification and Cultivation. 2003. Timber Press, Inc.

Acknowledgements

Green Culture Singapore would like to thank Forest Starr & Kim Starr for their kind permission to allow the author to reproduce their pictures on this feature article.

Feedback for this Article

Please post your thoughts or feedback for this article via the following topic in the Green Culture Singapore discussion forum.

<http://www.greenculturesg.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=16047>

If you have any enquiries or wish to publish a part or entire of this article, do send the Administrator a note via this email address – admin@greenculturesg.com.