

Grow Your First Hoya Plant With Love!

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Valentine's Day falls in the middle of February each year and that is also the time when the prices of roses reach astonishing figures everywhere. Although roses are traditionally associated with Valentines' Day, there are also other plants that can be used to convey your feelings to your loved ones.



Left: A *Hoya kerrii* vine with albomarginated leaves. (WW)

For those of you who have received a heart-shaped leaf that is potted up and adorned with sweet nothings and motives of hearts and other love symbols, the leaf you have gotten as a gift actually came from the sweetheart hoyo plant.

The sweet heart hoya is botanically known as *Hoya kerrii* and belongs to the frangipani family, Apocynaceae. Together with other *Hoya* species, it used to be classified in the milkweed family, Asclepiadaceae, which has now been subsumed into the frangipani family. The sweet heart hoya is known as “凹叶球兰” in Chinese which literally translates into ‘dented-leaf hoya’ due to the presence of a cleft in its leaves. It is also frequently referred to as “心叶球兰” (heart leaf hoya in Chinese).



Left: A young sweet heart hoya plant grown inside a hanging snail shell makes a good gift plant for Valentine’s Day. (LJH)



Right: A leaf cutting obtained from the all green, non-variegated version of the sweet heart hoya. (LJH)

Like many other *Hoya* species, the sweetheart hoya plant is a succulent vine that adopts an epiphytic growth habit. In its native habitat in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, the plant grows in a small amount of medium. It climbs its way up a tree trunk and curl around branches to reach for light that it requires for photosynthesis. As it grows, it forms roots that help it cling onto surfaces for support and for absorption of moisture and nutrients.

The heart-shaped leaves are green and fleshy, which are attached oppositely along the stem via 1 - 3 cm long petioles. These leaves are around 1 – 2 mm thick and it is said that they can grow up to 12 cm in size! Individual *Hoya kerrii* leaves and entire plants can sometimes be found on sale in selected nurseries and florists in Singapore when Valentine’s Day is around the corner.

Besides the all green version of sweet heart hoya, one can also find the more attractive variegated form, called *Hoya kerrii* 'Albomarginata', on sale in local nurseries. The leaves of this variety are green in the centre and yellow at the sides, as if green paint has been splattered on a yellow background. There is another variety of the sweet heart hoya where it bears a yellow variegated region in the center of each leaf, bordered by green on both sides.



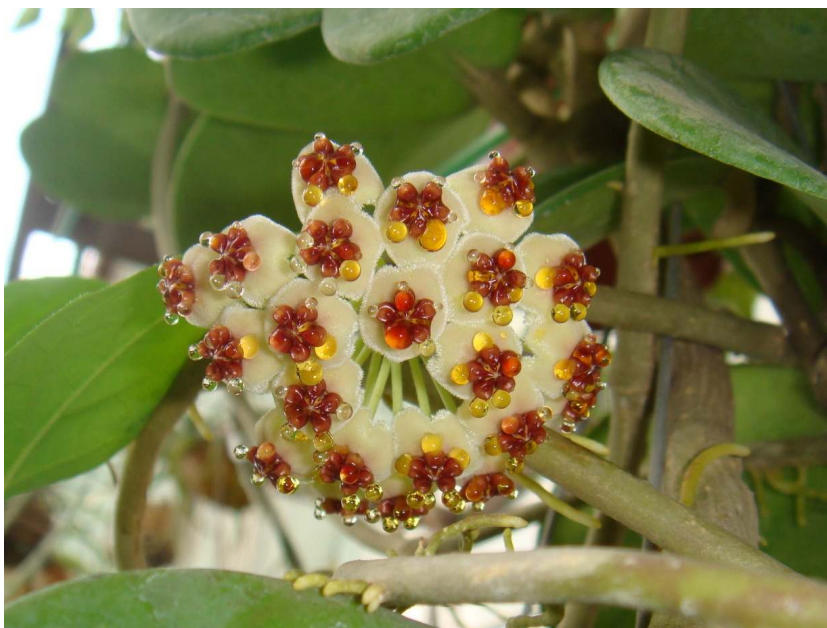
Left: The sweet heart hoya vine is slow-growing and one does not need to worry about it taking over his garden space too quickly. Think of creative ways to train the vine to best display it. (WW)

When compared to various commonly available hoyas, the sweet heart hoya is relatively slow in terms of its growth rate. Larger specimens have been observed to occasionally produce umbels of star-shaped, cream-coloured flowers with red centers. Flowers are faintly fragrant and produce copious amounts of dark coloured nectar which attracts insects like ants. Keep flowering plants away from upholstery as nectar that drips onto it will stain it and it will be difficult to remove stained material.

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In terms of light conditions for healthy growth, the sweet heart plant prefers to be situated in a bright area, away from direct sunshine. Excessive sunshine can bleach leaf colour.

Because it is an epiphyte, the sweet heart hoya benefits from being potted up in a very well-draining and porous growing medium. The medium needs to be moisture-retentive and one should water enough to keep the medium and roots just moist to touch. Hoya plants are sensitive to wet feet and will rot if overwatered. Locally, hoya growers either use only chopped coconut husk or a good potting mixture for growing their hoya plants.



Above: An attractive umbel of fragrant, yellow flowers produced by the sweet heart hoya plant. Note the dark coloured nectar that was secreted in every flower? (GCW)

Plants will benefit if given small amounts of slow-release chemical fertilizer pellets, such as Osmocote. Diluted solution made from a balanced water-soluble chemical fertilizer would also be suitable.

The sweet heart hoya, with its thick and succulent leaves, is relatively tolerant of drought and windy conditions. In hot and dry or windy weather conditions, leaves of this plant will show wrinkles if the plant has not been given sufficient water. This is a sign that the plant is showing that it needs to be watered.

Like most other hoyas, the sweet heart hoya can be vegetatively propagated most easily by stem-cuttings. Take care when taking cuttings as the plant secretes a white sticky sap that is poisonous. Each stem-cutting should have at least two nodes where root formation can take place. Take stem-cuttings that are semi-ripe, i.e. stems should neither be not too young and tender nor too old and woody.



Left: A leaf cutting of the sweet heart hoya showing new growth at the base of the leaf. (LC)

Right: Close-up picture of the new, emerging growth of the sweet heart hoya plant. (LC)

The sweet heart hoya can also be propagated from leaf-cuttings but this method is often slower and not always successful. It is best to take leaf-cuttings with a bit of the stem still attached.

In cultivation, the sweet heart hoya is most commonly attacked by mealy bugs on its leaves, stems and roots. Infestations by these pests are most easily eradicated if they are spotted early by spraying plants with a dose of diluted summer oil in water. Root mealy bugs can be controlled by drenching the soil with malathion solution. Several rounds of application are required to fully eradicate these pests, as well as, their progeny. Do check plants regularly for infestations.

Painting Your Own Sweet Heart Hoya Leaf

Single sweet heart hoya leaves make very affordable and unique gifts for that someone special on Valentine's Day. To decorate a leaf, let your creative juices flow freely and then paint your desired design on it!

One can use acrylic paints for this purpose! For those who are not artistically inclined and cannot paint, they may want to consider commercially available stencils. Acrylic paints and stencils can be obtained easily from shops that sell art and craft materials.



Left: Acrylic paints in tubes are a good choice of water-proof colour for decorating sweet heart hoya leaves. For those who cannot paint, aim to use stencils instead! (LJH)

Right: Decorated sweet heart hoya leaves can be potted up using appropriate pots and a layer of ornamental mulch can be applied to mask the soil surface. (LJH)

Alternatively, you can also try decorating your heart-shaped leaves with nail stickers (those used in manicure). Nail stickers are ideal due to their waterproof property!

Pot up your masterpiece in a small dainty pot and you are ready to show it off! Be it cartoons, flower designs, quotes or sweet nothings, your efforts will definitely bring a smile onto his/her face!

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