

Growing the Crepe Ginger

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The crepe ginger is a tall-growing and lush-looking, tropical shrub that is a common feature in local tropical-themed gardens. Growing up to a height of three meters, the crepe ginger is often used as a background plant. Several plants with their large, dark and glossy leaves can be grown in a group to create a bold, dramatic effect. The most prominent feature of the crepe ginger is its white, trumpet-shaped flowers. The white flower-dark green foliage colour contrast ensures the flowers stand out against the dark foliage. They avoid being obscured by other plants by blooming at the tip end of the ginger's tall, sturdy stems!



The crepe-like appearance of its blooms is what earned this ginger its common name. The white flowers have a yellow patch in the center. The edge of the flower is undulated. Although they look fragile, feel the petals between your fingers and you will realise they are rather waxy in texture. These are the true flowers of this ginger, which emerge from a cone-shaped cluster of bracts. The bracts, which are technically modified leaves, are maroon in colour and remains attractive for about a month or so even after the true flowers fade.

Left: The attractive flowers of the crepe ginger.

The entire plant is herbaceous and it adopts a rhizomatous growth habit. New shoots are sent up from the ground as the rhizome creeps forward at ground level. As they rise from the ground, the red coloured stems make interesting twists as each dark, glossy green leaf unfurls. When viewed from the top, the leaves can be seen being arranged in a spiral manner around the central stem, as if they were attached to the threads of a screw and hence the reason why this plant is a type of spiral ginger.



Right: A shoot appears from the ground as the rhizome creeps forward.



The crepe ginger is a member of the *Costaceae*, family of the spiral gingers and is native to Southeast Asia. The spiral gingers were formerly belong to the true ginger family, *Zingiberaceae* but were taken out of it because they do not yield aromatic oils. To add to the confusion, the crepe ginger has always been known botanically as *Costus speciosus* but it is now reclassified under a new genus and should be known as *Cheilocostus speciosus*. Reclassification was done recently after studies at the genetic level revealed that the crepe ginger differs from other spiral gingers in the *Costus* genus.

Right: The stems of the crepe ginger that adopt curious twists as the leaves unfurl.



Left: The local variety of crepe ginger has white flowers, but the variety with pinkish petals can only be obtained from overseas mail order nurseries currently. (Picture credit - Forest Starr and Kim Starr)

Right: The variegated variety of the crepe ginger. (Picture credit – NParks)

Besides the all green variety, there is a variegated version of the crepe ginger to choose from, especially when one finds the non-variegated plant boring and plain. Botanically known as *Cheilocostus speciosus* 'Variegatus', it can be bought from the larger plant nurseries locally. The variegation largely consists of a prominent, thick, white band that runs along the leaf's edge. The plant appears to be less vigorous, as expected from plants with variegation but will attain the same size and height as its all green counterpart eventually. It also flowers also less frequently. 'Pink Shadow' another interesting cultivar has flowers that are of a pink colour is not available locally presently but can be obtained via mail order from overseas nurseries.



Left: When established, the crepe ginger is a fast growing plant which adopts shrubby growth habit. It is a common a garden ornamental plant locally which also has uses in traditional medicine. (Picture credit – NParks)

Although the crepe ginger is better known as an ornamental plant, it has food and medicinal uses as well. Here we shall mention some of them. In Malaysia, the crepe ginger is to treat fever where the leaves are grounded into a paste and applied to the forehead to bring down a high fever. A decoction made from boiling parts of the plant is used to bathe a patient with fever. In India, the crepe ginger rhizome had been used to treat colds, rheumatism and pneumonia and it is also eaten during times of famine as a source of carbohydrates but is presumably not very palatable due to its fibrous texture. The young shoots are eaten like a vegetable in Indonesia.

The crepe ginger also has folkloric uses. The Kama Sutra documents the use of the crepe ginger in a cosmetic used on the eyelashes to increase sexual attractiveness. In Malaysia, the Malays believed that the crepe ginger possessed magical powers where it will drive away the evil spirits that caused one's ailments when used medicinally.

Cultivation Tips

The crepe ginger prefers a semishaded location but can be acclimatised to grow in full sun. The plant should also be protected from wind as excessive air movement will dry out the plant and break the stems.

It is important not to grow the crepe ginger in location that can get waterlogged. Therefore, plant the crepe ginger in friable, well-drained soil. The soil should also be supplemented with organic material, which will help to retain moisture. Do mulch the soil surface to keep the roots cool and to conserve moisture. Always remember that moisture is an important aspect of successful ginger growing. Fertilise generously with organic fertiliser to ensure vigorous growth.

Like other rhizomatous plants, the crepe ginger has the tendency to "move" from the original position to another where it was first planted. This ginger can be stopped at its tracks by cutting away the lead of the rhizome. Although this is not a permanent solution, this operation need not be done too frequently.

One of the benefits of growing the crepe ginger is that it is relatively pest and disease-free. The plant is also easily propagated. A rhizome section of the crepe ginger containing several stems can be cut, dug out the ground and potted up separately. Alternatively, the entire clump can be lifted from the ground and divided into smaller sections. Like other spiral gingers, the crepe ginger can be propagated via stem cuttings. Stick pieces of the cut stem sections, with the large leaves all cut into half, into a pot of moist soil. Rooting hormone is not needed. Within a few weeks, new growth will appear at the nodes.

References

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- Forest & Kim Starr, Hawaiian Ecosystems at Risk project (HEAR). More pictures of the crepe ginger can be found at the following link:

http://www.hear.org/starr/hiplants/images/thumbnails/html/costus_speciosus.htm

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