

## Light up your Garden with a Torch Ginger!

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The unopened inflorescences of the torch ginger are an important ingredient for *rojak* and *laksa*.

The torch ginger is an indispensable plant for an ornamental tropical-themed garden or a herb and spice garden. The plant itself makes a great garden landscape plant, its flowers have immense ornamental value and its young flowering shoots are an important spice. Various parts of the torch ginger plant also have folk medicinal uses. Hence, it is not one of those “can-see-but-cannot-eat” plants.

A hardcore tropical perennial plant, the torch ginger is native to areas near home - Malaysia and Indonesia. Botanically it is known as *Etlingera elatior*, the torch ginger is a member of the true ginger family, *Zingiberaceae*. It has been formerly classified in various other true ginger genera including *Alpinia*, *Phaeomoria* and *Nicolaia*. The genus is named after the German botanist Andreas Ernst Etlinger while the specific name *elatior*, in Latin, has the meaning of “taller”.



A mature torch ginger plant grows as a large clump that commands much attention.

The growth habit of the torch ginger is rhizomatous in nature. It is a large-growing herbaceous plant. A mature torch ginger plant is a stately one, commanding much attention. The leafy shoots of a mature specimen can reach a towering height of about 3 meters with a diameter of about 4 cm. The strap-like leaves that line alternately on the leafy shoots can grow up to a length of about 80 cm.

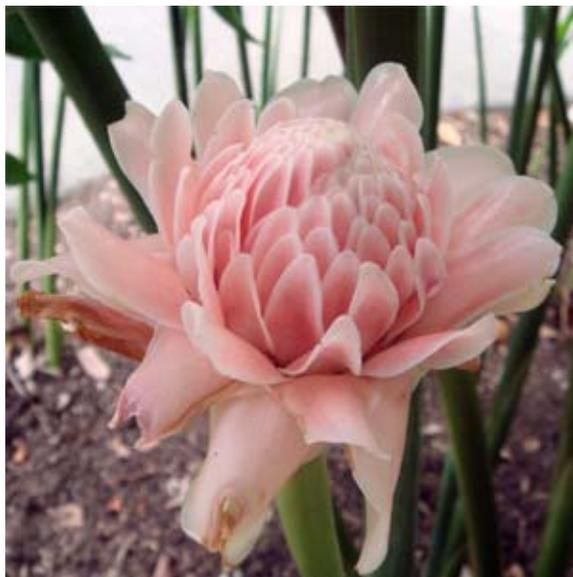
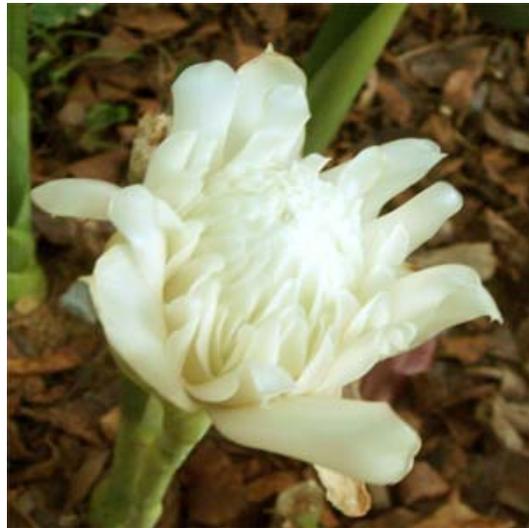
For those of you who have seen the torch ginger flower, the reason why the torch ginger is a popular cut flower in many areas around the world is clearly apparent. Due to the striking resemblance of the inflorescence to a flaming torch, it is not difficult to discern why the common name for this ginger is as such. Besides possessing ornamental value, the young flowering shoot (often called a flower bud) of the torch ginger is an indispensable ingredient used to flavour both *rojak* and *laksa*, which are popular dishes in Malaysia and Singapore.

The flowers of the torch ginger are produced in an interesting way. The inflorescence arises from the rhizome beneath the ground like a spear and is protected by a series of bracts. It is supported on a scape that can reach a height of 60 cm to more than a meter. The thickness of the scape can range from 1 to 2.5 cm in diameter. When the final height has been attained, the outer protective bracts gradually open. These outer bracts eventually become reflexed to form the 'rim' of the burning torch. This, in turn, reveals a central, pinecone-like structure consisting of many small tight bracts that form the 'flame'. The individual true flowers appear from between the bracts found on the pinecone-like structure.



The beginning and the end of a torch ginger inflorescence – the young flower shoot (**left**) and the fruiting head, also called the infructescence (**right**).

When mature, the torch ginger blooms all year round in the tropics. Its inflorescence is available in three main colours, namely, pink, red and white. When not in flower, plants from the three varieties cannot be easily differentiated via their aerial parts as all plants will be similarly green in appearance. However, there is a torch ginger variety that produces red inflorescences that has purplish red leaf undersides and the leafy shoots also take on a similar reddish tinge. In general, the pink variety is the one that is the most floriferous which is followed by the red and white varieties. It is therefore not surprising to *rojak* fans now why the *rojak* flower that they are familiar with is usually pink in colour.



Which colour do you prefer? There are three different types of torch ginger inflorescences to choose from – red (**top left**) and white (**top right**) and pink (**bottom**).

After successful pollination, a fruiting head that looks like a club with numerous round bumps on it forms. These are actually individual fruits, technically referred to as berries. They are green at first and turn red when ripe. Numerous small and dark-coloured seeds can be obtained from them.



The red torch ginger that has leaves that take on a reddish tinge on their undersides – an additional decorative element not seen in all other torch ginger varieties.

The torch ginger also has a place in an eco-garden. The flowers attract the sunbird, its natural pollinator. Whether grown for food use or as a sunbird attractant, one should refrain from using chemical pesticides in the garden. An organically grown garden is generally a safer and healthier place for every living thing that visits it.

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First and foremost, the torch ginger is a huge plant and is not one that can be grown in containers. However, apartment gardeners who love and want to grow this plant need not despair! Go to your nearest community garden to get yourself some space to grow a plant. If there isn't a community garden, go start one and this is perhaps the most convenient place for you to do a multitude of plants.

The torch ginger thrives in soil that is well-drained and moisture-retentive. Refrain from growing the plant in a waterlogged location. Clay soil which is the common soil type encountered in Singapore is best amended with liberal amounts of organic matter such as compost. Organic materials incorporated into clayey soils will help to open up the structure to improve aeration, improve drainage as well as retain moisture.

The plant would also appreciate a layer of organic mulch consisting of dried leaves or compost around the root zone. Organic mulches offer three main benefits – they help to maintain a cool constant temperate, reduce water loss from the roots during hot and dry weather and provide nutrients for the plant when they break down. Additional feeding will promote growth and should be done using organic fertiliser but it is usually not required.



True flowers of the torch ginger peeking out from the in-between the bracts found on the pinecone structure.

Plants should be grown in a sheltered spot that is protected from winds as the leafy shoots can become damaged and the leaves get shredded by constant winds. Winds can also overly dry out the plant. In terms of light requirements, the torch ginger plant grows best when it is planted in a semi-shaded location. It can, however, be acclimatised to grow under higher light levels. When exposed to more sunlight, the plant reacts via an interesting manner by growing shorter in stature.

A torch ginger plant is generally not invasive as the clump of leafy shoots is quite tight and advances at quite a manageable pace. However, rhizomes can wander into unwanted areas in the garden and if one is seen advancing in a wrong direction, it can be stopped at its tracks by breaking it with a shovel and dug up and used as material for propagation. When propagating, it is better to obtain a clump of several leafy shoots rather than one that just consist of one leafy shoot. After a section of the rhizome has been broken and dug up, the leafy shoots can be cut away (to reduce the loss of water from the leaves) and potted up in a well-drained media. Do not bury the rhizome section too deeply as that can cause it to rot. Leave the cutting in a sheltered position until the growth of a new shoot is spotted.

Fortunately, the torch ginger is relatively pest-free and disease-free plant. The most common pest is perhaps the grasshopper that chews along the leaf margins. Sucking insects such as spider mites may congregate on the leaf undersides while aphids may be found feasting on the young shoots and leaves. In general, all these pests rarely do great damage to an established plant but attention must be paid on a newly established, young plant.

## Reference

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