



Cultivation Notes

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Turk's Cap Lily

Lilium superbum L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family LILIACEAE

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The lily family numbers several thousand species in over 200 genera, including such common and seemingly dissimilar wildflowers as Dog Tooth Violet, Clintonia, and Solomon's Seal, but the name lily is used chiefly for members of the genus *Lilium*. Lilies grow all around the world, in and out of gardens. One authority lists 80 species that grow wild, about 20 in North America. Since earliest times, lilies have had a place in religion and art. They are mentioned in the Bible, and the white lily was used five thousand years ago to symbolize chastity. In early Christian times it was dedicated to the Virgin, finally becoming known in the nineteenth century as the Madonna Lily. In medieval times, lily bulbs were used medicinally. Pounded up and mixed with honey, they were believed to be good for scurvy and ulcers. They were also mixed with barley and baked into cakes as a cure for dropsy. An infusion made by boiling bulbs with vinegar was used to remove corns.

Lilium superbum, the Turk's Cap Lily, is a beautiful native species that grows wild from Massachusetts to Florida and west to Indiana. It is hardy to Zone 5. In a situation that suits it, Turk's Cap Lily can reach a height of 8' to 10' and have as many as 40 flowers on one stem. Color varies from yellow-orange to deep red with completely reflexed petals that expose the handsome brown stamens to full view.

This lily grows best in moist, acid soil with open shade, but one summer I found a young colony in full sun growing beside Route 1 in Matunuck. Although native lily species have a reputation for being difficult to propagate, H. R. Phillips says in *Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers* that many gardeners have reported success, especially with Turk's Cap.

CULTIVATION NOTES

Lilium superbum L. Turk's Cap Lily

Perennial. Yellow-orange to red flowers in late July and early August. Upright growth form, 2-8' in height, with flowers 3-5" across, thriving in wet soil and sun or high shade. May be grown in a perennial border.

Seed Collection and Treatment: Seeds may be collected when the seed capsules ripen, turning from green to a dry, papery tan, about two months after flowering. Mature capsules are 1 1/2" long and 3/4" across, with six prominent seams. A single capsule holds hundreds of seeds stacked in six narrow compartments. Ripe seeds are golden brown, nearly triangular and about 1/4" long. When the capsules split along the seams, spill seeds out and inspect them carefully for signs of insect damage (holes in the capsules or larvae among the seeds). Discard damaged seeds.

If they are not to be sown immediately, store them in an airtight container in the refrigerator. To plant outdoors, set them 4" deep in acid soil, spacing seeds three to the inch in rows four inches apart. They may be sown in sun or partial shade. **The important point to remember is that the seeds have a complex dormancy. Sown fresh outdoors, they will not appear until 18 months later. Be sure to mark the seedbed carefully.**

To produce seedlings the first year, you need to give them a warm, moist period (during which they develop into tiny white bulbs the size of a seed pearl) followed by a cold period, then another warm period. They should be layered in dampened peat or sphagnum moss in a sealed container and stored at room temperature for 6-8 weeks or until bulbs develop, then placed in the refrigerator for another 6-8 weeks. They may then be planted indoors in a growing mix or, when danger of frost has passed, outdoors in fertile, well-drained nursery beds.

First-year plants send up a single leaf, which persists for only a part of the growing season. The plants are very sensitive to any environmental change at this point and may go dormant early. Don't discard them without checking for healthy dormant bulbs in the soil. When they go dormant after the second growing season, they should be transplanted to a permanent location.

Propagation from bulb scales: Another method of increase is to dig a Turk's Cap Lily bulb after it has bloomed, remove the outer two rows of scales around its base, replant the mother bulb and either plant the scales outdoors in a nursery bed or speed up development by giving them the same treatment as the seeds.

Comments: DO NOT DIG PLANTS IN THE WILD. Obtain plants only from your own property or where you have written permission to dig, or purchase from a reputable local source such as the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society or the New England Wild Flower Society.

References

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