

Canna CULTURE

Lilies make a summer comeback

Once considered commonplace, even vulgar, canna lilies are making a strong comeback. Now available in many colors, of both leaf and bloom, and even a variety of shapes and sizes, they have come into their own to make dramatic statements in the garden. Cannas are no longer in the one-size-fits-all category. One can choose tall stalks with bold, in-your-face voluptuous blooms of the Carmen Miranda persuasion or elect the delicate pastel and graceful blooms reminiscent of the refined charms of Grace Kelly. Between the two extremes is a vast group of hybrids to add stature and drama to the garden. Because they will claim attention as exclamation points, a little care in siting will pay off.

While true that most cannas are tall and are better placed towards the rear, there are now available shorter hybrids in the 2-3 foot range for use in the front or mid-section of the garden. These are also suitable for containers. An example of the smaller variety would be 'Journey's End,' with medium-sized creamy flowers splashed and speckled with coral pink, 'Madame Butterfly,' 'Pink Sunburst,' or 'Tropical Rose.' These top out at about 3 feet and tend to display more pastel colors than their flamboyant, statuesque sisters.

Among the taller standouts, there is so much variety of leaf and bloom that virtually unlimited combinations can be found. There are the large smoky-burgundy leaves of 'Australia,' topped with vivid red blooms, a stunning combination. The truly adventurous gardener might like to try 'Bengal Tiger,' also called 'Pretoria,' with bold green-and-gold striped leaves accentuated by a burgundy edge and blooms of brilliant orange. Yes, you have to like orange flowers. In the same vein, both 'Cleopatra' and 'Lucifer' flaunt flashy blooms streaked yellow, red and white. Not for the timid or conservative gardener.

Less blatant, 'Stuttgart' has boldly striped green and white leaves, while 'Minerva,' a tall beauty with striped waxy green leaves, is crowned with coral red flower buds which open



surprisingly to lemon yellow. These few represent the tip of the iceberg, as one horticultural expert lists 45 varieties of canna, and that doesn't begin to be comprehensive. So the field is wide open. Get a catalogue or go on-line and prepare to be dazzled.

Experts are generally in agreement regarding canna culture. All confirm that the rhizomes must be planted in the spring after the soil warms up considerably – they detest cool soil, which can remain damp and inhospitable for a long time, depending on quixotic spring temperatures. Don't rush them into the ground; mid-to-late April is soon enough. In this area they should be planted in sun, although not exposed to the punishing force of relentless all-day sun. Further, they must have rich, moist but well-drained soil. And finally, cannas are heavy feeders and respond well to dehydrated cow manure at planting time and again at mid-summer in order to keep those lush blooms coming. Do not neglect to water well before and after fertilizing. With such TLC they will reward you with all-summer bloom and will come back next year bigger and better than ever. They will multiply in time, but not so that they become invasive. Rhizomes can be divided about every 3-5 years if you feel like it, but don't feel obligated.

As usual, mulch well for the three-fold purpose of retaining sufficient moisture while at the same time enabling proper drainage, enriching the organic content of the soil and helping to curb the ever-threatening weed population.

Cannas can do if you give them a chance. So include them in your gardening plans for spring and summer 2006. You won't be sorry.

– Barbara Hodges



PHOTOS BY NEIL HODGES

Top left: Brilliant bloom and burgundy leaf showcase canna 'Australia'

Top: Tim Drake's striking canna 'Bengal Tiger'

Middle: The delicate flower of canna 'panache'

Bottom: Garden tour 2003 poster canna, courtesy Don and Sandy Williamson