

On Cannas
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Are you really sure you want to ask me about cannas? That would be something similar to asking you to tell everything you know about acne or photodermatitis or something like that, whatever that something may be. Well, then, here goes. You did ask for it!

The popular name for all species of canna is "Indian Shot," because the seeds are so hard that they were actually used by native peoples in sling shots to kill birds and small mammals (and blind opponents in war.) As with many but not all things in nature, there is a purpose for this, for the seed can float great distances, until the hard outer seed coat softens, at which point the seed sinks to the bottom and germinates. If it is lucky enough to be in shallow water or boggy ground that floods and then dries out a bit, it will grow into a new canna. Home gardeners who wish to germinate seed should soak them for several days before sowing, or better, put them in plastic bags filled with damp peat moss or sphagnum. However, canna seed germinates most successfully at temperatures around 75 degrees, so the old gardeners placed the moistened flats on top of the furnaces of their greenhouses..

The genus is circumpolar, but occurs only in moist, open tropical and semi-tropical areas in Asia, Central and South America. Because of the capacity of cannas to disseminate themselves by floating great distances, even over salt water, the actual origin of many species is not known. There are approximately 50 in the genus, though again, the number is uncertain, as cannas freely interbreed among themselves, and interspecific crosses are as common among them as interracial crosses among humans. Almost always, as with humans, there is a gain there, of vigor or beauty or adaptability.

Cannas became enormously fashionable in Victorian gardens, as the centerpiece for carpet bedding schemes of lurid or exotic foliage. Their descent into tackiness was precipitous, however, and by the 1940's in America, they were largely considered garbage can plants, grown in back alleys all through the south, or as chicken yard plants, used to conceal the less pleasant aspects of the poultry yard. But I once wrote an article which began, "If plants had a sense of humor, cannas would be smiling all over...." For they have now returned to fashion, and one can buy hybrids for \$150 or \$200 dollars a rhizome. It is good not to do that, however, for within a few short years, the price will fall

dramatically, since cannas are incredibly reproductive, each fleshy rhizome producing many "eyes" that will in turn produce new rhizomes. So it was with Canna x generalis 'Stuttgart,' with magnificent white splashes on its green leaves, which began in the plant market at those prices, and now can be had for \$25 a dozen.

Cannas grown in gardens are largely very complex hybrids of many species, though specialists pride themselves on maintaining pure species, such as Canna iridiflora, C. glauca or C. indica (syn. C. edulis). All these species are interesting in themselves. Iridiflora is vast, reaching a height of perhaps seven feet, rivaling some bananas in stature. Glauca is a genuinely aquatic species, with gray-green leaves and delicate, orchid-like flowers, and because it grows in standing water, it is very valuable as a pond plant, or on a terrace or by a swimming pool in a large tub. It is a boon to weekend gardeners, since one need only top up the tub with water on Sunday and return on Friday to a healthy plant. Indica (Edulis) is particularly interesting, because its starchy rhizomes provided the basis for the infant formula called 'tous les mois' in Haiti, a porridge of which was an acceptable and nourishing milk substitute available "every month" that kept many an infant alive after its mother's milk had ceased to flow.

The 50 or so species in the genus CANNACEA have given rise to perhaps thousands of hybrids, though the number increases each year either through the work of breeders or by accidental matings in gardens. Garden hybrids were previously divided into two groups, C x generalis, with large, gladiolus like leaves, and C. x orchiodes, with smaller, more delicate blossoms. Now there are so many intermediate hybrids that those distinctions have been dropped. Modern gardeners who are connoisseurs seem far to prefer the orchid types, however, which are spidery and delicate in their form, and are often of delicious colors of peach and cream and buff.

Cannas are ease itself to grow, and in fact, in climates where they survive winter, can become invasive pests. They require a rich, deep, moist soil, and some – those with C. glauca in their veins – will colonize the edges of lakes and ponds, much as another tropical plant, Colocasia esculenta will do. (It is taro, easily acquired for garden ornament in any oriental or hispanic grocery store.) Cannas are what gardeners call greedy feeders, as their large fleshy leaves would indicate. They do best therefore with a generous sprinkling of a granular fertilizer – something like 10-10-10 – though as very adaptable plants, they are certainly able to put up with far less than what they would consider the best.

Since cannas are not hardy much beyond Zone 7 (winter lows of 0) they require careful winter storage, as do dahlias and gladiolus. The rhizomes should be dug just before frost, or immediately after frost has withered the leaves. Top growth should be cut away to within an inch of the rhizome, and they should then be cured on dry newspaper for a week or two. They should then be packed in barely moist peat moss, and kept in a cool but frost free environment for the winter.

They should be checked from time to time, and a little water added if they show signs of shriveling. The rhizomes may be started into early growth in spring before frost, if a sunny windowsill is available, or they may be planted out in the garden after all danger of frost has passed.

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They can then be packed into

In the deep and middle south of North America, cannas are considered heirlooms, and 'Grandma's Canna' grows in many a garden. One could in fact make a whole garden of cannas, since the genus and its many hybrids are very diverse. Such a garden might have a rather mad, eccentric look, unless one thought of it as a botanic collection. It is perhaps an idea for one's retirement years.