

A Huntress for the Holidays

If retail stores had any say in the matter, Holiday shopping would be a twelve month ordeal; this year I was astounded to see the extent of Holiday shopping promotions the day after Halloween! Unfortunately for the plant world, the number of plants promoted for the season is surprisingly narrow, with Poinsettias always being the plant of prominence. There are a number of other plants that provide seasonally appropriate color and last for years – not weeks – as a house plant or can even double as an outdoor ornamental during the summer. For a number of years I was drawn to Variegated Blue Flax Lily, *Dianella tasmanica* ‘Variegata’, as an interesting container plant for shade. It was not until years later that I discovered that *Dianella* could also serve as a wonderful houseplant appropriate for the Holidays.

Dianella was recently placed in the all too difficult to pronounce family of Xanthorrhoeaceae. Fortunately, it also resides in the more easily recognized subfamily of Hemerocallidaceae or Daylily Family. Currently, 42 species are described within the genus and they span the regions from Southern Africa and Madagascar to SE Asia and south to Australia and New Zealand. The genus name was first authored in 1786 by the French naturalist Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) within his massive 8 volume Encyclopédie Methodique Botanique. Despite the size of Lamarck’s work, he failed to adequately describe the plant and in 1789, the French botanist Antoine Laurent de Jussieu (1748-1836) properly described the plant. *Dianella* honors Dianna the mythical Roman goddess of hunting who preferred to hunt in the woods. The suffix ‘ella’ means small in stature. Although the connection may initially seem obtuse, when the plant was first introduced to France, it was found to flourish in woodland conditions and King’s Gardeners nicknamed it ‘Little Diana of the Woods’.



Dianella is a caespitose or tufted perennial plant in its native regions. It slowly spreads by underground rhizomes (horizontal stems) and produces long, sword-shaped leaves. The foliage can vary in height from 1’ to nearly 7’. The ¼-½” diameter white or light blue flowers appear in clusters atop long slender stems. With imagination, the flowers appear like small arrows, drawing a comparison once again with the huntress Diana. Supposedly, the flowers yield small and very ornamental blue fruits, but I have yet to witness any fruits in NJ gardens. Plants typically prefer moist, shady locations; I have also grown them in drier, full sun conditions with equally acceptable results.

Dianella tasmanica ‘Variegata’ (Pictured on the left) is the selection that is most readily available for NJ gardeners. The species was first described in 1858 by

the English botanist and plant explorer Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911). It is native to Australia and, as the species epithet indicates, Tasmania! Outdoors, the plants prefer a lightly shaded location with moisture, although they are also tolerant of periods of drought. The form 'Variegata' has very attractive 2' long leaves that have bold white stripes predominantly on the leaf margins. It is winter hardy to zone 8 and has endured NJ frosts down to 24°F before being brought inside without any ill results. It's tolerance of shade and dry air makes it an ideal house plant as I first witnessed several years back at a fellow gardeners home. She had simply brought the container that it had grown in throughout the summer into a room that received filtered afternoon sun and it was thriving – not a brown edged or dead leaf to be seen!



After several years, the plant had filled out a 14" container (Pictured above) and made a spectacular specimen. After a number of years, the plants will obviously become pot bound. They can be pulled from their container and are easily divided with a sharp

knife and repotted – providing you numerous new plants or allowing you to share it with your gardening friends! There is also a golden variegated form called 'Yellow Stripe' that is equally as attractive. Typical of houseplant culture, let the plant dry slightly between watering throughout the winter and begin to fertilize again come March as the sun becomes brighter and growth resumes.

During this Holiday Season, consider bringing *Dianella* inside to add that touch of white or gold to the household decorations. A very attractive and long-lived plant that also invokes the 'Hunt' for those Holiday dinners – it is just what the dollar conscious gardener deserves!