

Marvelous Martagons



I never have understood why martagon lilies are not more commonly grown and why they are equally uncommon in the trade. Well, maybe I do. Compared to the spectacularly sized and colored Asiatic trumpet lilies heralded in the catalogues and garden centers today, the martagon lily speaks with a more quiet, sophisticated voice. It is not a “show-biz hussy” in the garden. Perhaps if my garden was in full sun rather than in the dappled shade of mature oak trees, I too, would opt for a more gaudy show. However, martagon lilies, despite their uncommonness, are the premier lilies for the shade.

I can vividly recall my first exposure to this garden elite. In June, 1993, while a guest of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, I was housed in the

Linnea Hotel (as in Carl Linnaeus, 18th century professor of botany at Uppsala who developed our classification system for plants) near the campus. The breakfast room looked out on Linnaeus’s Garden through the branches of a centuries old beech tree. Beneath the branches were numerous lilies in white and various shades of pink in full bloom. I kept asking myself, “What lily blooms in the dense shade of a beech tree in June?” which began my martagon lily quest. It was later that week, in the Carl Milles sculpture garden overlooking the harbor in Stockholm, that I was bowled over by magnificently grown towers of white martagons, which contained 75 blooms or more on a stalk.

I have since learned that this lily has naturalized throughout the United Kingdom and Scandinavia and is not just a native of Western Europe. Its range extends across Asia into Northern Mongolia and Siberia. It does vary somewhat across its range, the white form originating from the former Yugoslavia and a deep maroon form in Mongolia.

First noted in cultivation in 1596, it is hardy to zones 3 and 4 in the U.S. It is very long lived. Hallmarks of the plant are its symmetrically placed whorled leaves in various shades of green to blue gray, which march up the stalks (some of which are deep purple in color) to the pyramids of flowers. The flowers themselves are rarely more than two inches across, and have recurved petals like the familiar turkscap lily (*Lilium superbum*), found throughout the Appalachian mountains. Its natural colors, as noted above, range from pure white through various shades of pink, and lavender to a deep maroon. Some would describe the odor that some forms have as malodorous, but I would describe the smell as more “sickly sweet.” To introduce orange and yellow into the color lines, martagon lilies have been hybridized with other species lilies, including *L. hansonii*, resulting in the Paisley hybrids series (gold, yellow, lilac, tangerine).

As I said, this is not the lily you find for sale at the local garden center, but one that must be ordered from a catalog. Hence, they tend to be quite pricey. It is rare to find them for less than \$10 a bulb, and some cultivars are as much as \$75 apiece. The best midwestern source for these bulbs is Ambergate Gardens in Chanhassen, Minnesota, near the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Owner Mike Heger champions this lily and advertises an open house on a weekend in June to see his display. However, if you become hooked, you will quickly exhaust the varieties that Mike offers and you will resort to the premier source in North America, the Lily Nook, in Neepawa, Manitoba, Canada (www.lilynook.mb.ca). I have been ordering from this source for more than five years, and they never seem to run out of new varieties to offer. The prices are in Canadian dollars, as well.

The cultivation of these lilies is not difficult. They prefer humusy soil in open (dappled shade) and do not seem to be pH sensitive. They are said to never need dividing, and, in my own experience, dividing a clump seems to diminish its vigor for a few years. They multiply readily into very large clumps, and I have never used any special fertilizer on them. They do come up very early in the spring, as they are June bloomers, but I have only rarely noted any frost damage to the leaves. They seem to be pest free. As Mike Heger said many years ago in his talk to the WHPS on the subject, cutting off the spent blossoms seems to make no difference in the quality of next year's flowers. I have practiced this for a number of years now, and have enjoyed the candelabra display of seedpods in the fall. Though most of the time no staking of the towers of flowers is required, I do stake the seed pods on occasion as they become extremely heavy before they are fully ripened. The birds love the ripe seeds (especially chickadees) and it is not unusual for them to strip the pods of all seeds by early December. Over the years, I have made no effort to grow them from seed, but several seedlings have spontaneously appeared on the edges of the path. The first of these will bloom this June. I wonder what color it will be? Will I have a new hybrid? ('Nakoma Sunrise'?) Perhaps I should make more of an effort to grow the seed, at the expense of the chickadees.

In recent years, I have been trying to obtain cultivars of true yellow and a brighter pink. These are more expensive, but are well worth it in my opinion. The white form is the least vigorous. The most vigorous include 'Terrace City Hybrids', 'Mahogany Bells' (deep purple stems with gray-green leaves), and 'Claude Shride'. The latter are all available from Ambergate Gardens. My favorite color is one called 'Port Wine' (colored just as the name implies), and this has been available from Klehm's Nursery in the past.

I have been impressed with the use of these bulbs in Europe since my initial encounter. I recall cemeteries in southern Sweden with martagons naturalized everywhere for a spectacular effect. In England, in restored meadows on many estates, they have been allowed to naturalize once again. Though I have seen some wonderfully colored cultivars throughout England, typically in a woodland setting, they are rarely labeled and have been extant in the garden for many years. I also recall the wonderful display in the natural areas of the garden at St. John's College in Cambridge, England.

So, if you are around on June 15 and plan to take part in the WHPS tour in Nakoma, please come and enjoy the marvelous martagons. And if you have a woodsy garden, gosh, by all means, find a spot for this premier shade lily. I guarantee you will not be disappointed, and you will join the ranks of the elite gardener!

—A. Hort Hound