

Toad Lilies: Gems of the Fall

By Dawn Parish

Toad lilies belong to the genus *Tricyrtis* and in researching this article I found them listed in the Liliaceae, Uvulariaceae, and Convallariaceae families. The layperson need only consider them at home in the lily family. There are about 20 species known, with many more hybrids and cultivars existing. *Tricyrtis* occur in Asia from Nepal to China, and Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippine Islands. Japan is blessed with the largest diversity of this genus. They prefer moist, organic-rich soil, slightly on the acidic side, and plenty of shade. Never allow the roots to become severely dry. Plants are rhizomatous without becoming obnoxious. Dense, yet manageable colonies will form over time. Cold hardy to Zone 5, they perform admirably in the south as well. The blooms are remarkably unique and look almost like miniature orchids. Most are creamy white and are heavily flecked with purple spots. Often the blooms are tinted with blue or purple, and there are a few yellow species. *Tricyrtis* bloom in late summer and well into fall offering a welcome splash of color and intrigue at a time when the garden seems to shed the lushness of spring and early summer.



The name Toad Lily, hardly justifies the unique beauty of these plants. One legend states that the Tasaday Indians of the Philippines would rub juice from this plant on their hands and forearms

when engaging in toad hunting expeditions. This rub reportedly drove herds of toads into the waiting arms of their hunters. The extent of the Tasaday existence, if at all, is in question lending significant doubt to the toad luring properties of this genus. It would seem to reason that toads would be attracted to the plants themselves. Another reason for the disagreeable name could be due to the spotty and sometimes glossy nature of their leaves that is highly reminiscent of toad skin.

Our interest in this plant stems from colonies established in the garden prior to 1997. Records from 1996 show we acquired a *Tricyrtis motatagism*, and in 1997 a *Tricyrtis hatogisa*. Neither of these two species exists so we were left to figure it out on our own. No easy task. Toad lilies are notoriously mixed up in the trade and a mislabeled accession only hinders the identification. Most likely these plants are *Tricyrtis hirta*, or a hybrid with *T. hirta* and *T. formosana*. Regardless of the elusive identity, these colonies have graced our fall palette with their unique blooms for many years encouraging further trials with more species and cultivars. Our collection has grown and prospered and extended our toad lily pallet.

Toad lilies perform their best with a little age, at least three years or so. Although our plants are quite new, there are many that have shown some early promise. *Tricyrtis hirta* 'Miyazaki', one of our earliest flowering varieties, offers arching stems with flowers appearing on every leaf axil from crown to tip. Flowers are noticeably larger and are white with light purple spots. A variegated form, 'Miyazaki Gold,' is also available. *T. hirta* 'White Towers' offers gracefully arching stems laden with pure white flowers borne at every leaf axil. *T. hirta* 'Hotatagisa' has formed a nice sized colony with shorter stems and blue tinted flowers with few purple spots. *Tricyrtis sinonome* is most probably a hybrid of *T. hirta* with *Sinonome* as the name of the cultivar. It is listed both ways in literature. This is most similar to our original

plants of questionable nomenclature. The stems are slightly arching with flowers of cream heavily doused with purple spots. *Tricyrtis* 'Togen' is a lovely hybrid between *T. hirta* and *T. formosana* with nearly all white flowers that have a light hint of lavender on the tips.

Tricyrtis formosana 'Dark Beauty' is healthy and its flowers are spotted purple with a dark purple tint on the tips. *T. formosana* 'Gilt Edge' and 'Samurai' both have dark green foliage with bright yellow-green margins. They are recent additions in the garden, so there is no accompanying form or flower description.

Tricyrtis lasiocarpa is a late bloomer with upright stems, larger leaves and purple spotted flowers with a rich blue tint on the tips of the petals.



Tricyrtis lasiocarpa

Some toad lilies have other noteworthy characteristics other than their unique flowers. A number of cultivars are available with dynamically colored foliage. *Tricyrtis* 'Lightning Strike' has wildly variegated foliage with streaks of dark green and bright yellow. The leaves of *T.* 'Gates of Heaven' are a bright lemon yellow, while *T.* 'Emperor' shares the same knockout color with a clean white margin. *T.* 'Shining Light' offers glowing yellow-green leaves with a prominent streak of dark green. Toad lilies are easy to grow provided with the right conditions and provide late summer and fall interest. Visit the collection at the arboretum to choose the best variety for your garden.

Tricyrtis species and cultivars in our collection:

T. affinis 'Key Lime Pie'
T. formosana 'Emperor'
T. formosana 'Gates of Heaven'
T. formosana 'Gilt Edge'

T. formosana 'Dark Beauty'
T. formosana 'Samurai'
T. formosana 'Stolonifera'
T. formosana 'Variegata'
T. hirta 'Alba'
T. hirta 'Hotatagisa'
T. hirta 'Miyazaki'
T. hirta 'Moonlight'
T. hirta 'White Towers'
T. hirta 'Variegata'
T. lasiocarpa
T. macrantha
T. macranthopsis
T. macropoda
T. setochinensis
T. x 'Sinonome'
T. x 'Lightning Strike'
T. x 'Miyazaki Gold'
T. x 'Shining Light'
T. x 'Togen'

Bouquets to SFA Mast Arboretum Volunteers!

SFA Mast Arboretum Volunteers put down their shovels and took off their gardening gloves to enjoy a well-deserved break at a recent banquet honoring their dedicated service to the Arboretum. Dr. Creech and the Arboretum staff hosted the banquet at the Art Center in downtown Nacogdoches. Dr. Creech presented a slide show highlighting volunteer contributions to the Arboretum throughout its history. Each year, the volunteers donate thousands of hours—propagating, planting, watering, weeding, mulching, building, selling, baking, fundraising, and educating. Volunteers are an integral part of the Garden Gala Day and Fabulous Fall Festival plant sales as well as the educational programs for elementary –junior high students. “Each volunteer brings something special with them to the arboretum, and I hope each one realizes how vital they are to our programs. We are so lucky to have the support of this wonderful group of gardeners and educators,” explained Dr. Creech, “We also welcome new volunteers at any time...no green thumb needed!

If you are interested in joining the SFA Mast Arboretum Volunteers, contact Elyce at 936-468-1832 or erodewald@sfasu.edu.