

Trumpeting clivia

Colorful collectible perfect for shady areas of garden

By Karen Dardick

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The world of plants has something in common with the world of fashion – trends. Plants fall in and out of favor and sometimes can be regarded as ho-hum for decades unless plant connoisseurs become captivated.

This is what's happening with clivia, a South African native that heralds spring with clusters of red-orange trumpet-shaped blooms. This striking evergreen plant was all the rage in Europe in the early 1820s but by the 20th century it was ignored as commonplace.

Now, in the 21st century, a clivia craze is again sweeping the world. As collectors snap up one-of-a-kind cultivars, home gardeners are reaping the benefits because clivia enthusiasts are creating new flower colors like yellow, peach and deep orange. At the same time, more plants are available at local nurseries – and at affordable prices, often below \$50 for 3-year-old plants in bloom.

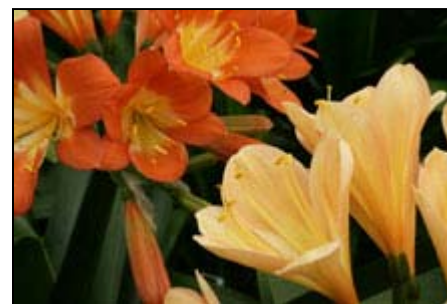
This wasn't so a decade ago. Like designer gowns, exotic clivia plants commanded high prices. Clivia collectors have deep pockets, like orchid collectors who don't blink an eye at spending hundreds or even thousands of dollars for one plant. One exotic Chinese clivia sold for \$35,000 to a collector.

In 1995, when yellow-flowered clivias were among the rarest cultivated plants in the world, the mail-order catalog for White Flower Farms, the Litchfield, Conn., upscale nursery, offered a rare pale yellow clivia cultivar, Sir John Thouron, for \$950.

Since then prices have fallen. In 2003, White Flower Farms offered the medium yellow clivia Krugerrand for \$150. Locally, shoppers can purchase San Marcos Yellow, Solomone hybrids or Monterey Bay Yellow clivias at area nurseries such as Walter Andersen for about \$39, along with the more widely known Clivia miniata with orange-red flowers.

Amaryllis relative

What is now a popular plant for shady landscapes was a rarity when it was discovered in South Africa in the 1820s. Because of



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune
Newer hybrids with softer colors are highly sought after by collectors around the world.

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its deep green strappy leaves, clivia was originally thought to be a new species of agapanthus. However, the plants were later correctly identified as a new genus in the amaryllis family.

The genus name, clivia (pronounced "klive-ee-ah") honors Lady Charlotte Florentia Clive because the plant first bloomed in England in the greenhouses located at Syon House, the Middlesex residence of the Duke of Northumberland and his wife, Lady Clive. The species name *miniata* describes the orange-red flower color.

According to the definitive book, "Clivias" by Harold Koopowitz (Timber Press, 2002), these first blooms probably appeared in 1827 and clivia instantly became the darlings of plant collectors.

Explorers discovered three more species in South Africa, subsequently named *Clivia caulescens*, *C. gardenii*, and *C. nobilis*. All species, including a recent discovery, *C. mirabilis*, technically are evergreen herbs with leaves arranged in two ranks produced from a thick rhizome. They vary in flower shapes and colors and types of stems.

Shallow rooted, they thrive in deeply shaded forests of South Africa. When planted in conditions similar to their native habitats – protected from freezing temperatures or extreme humidity and nurtured by well-draining soil containing humus similar to forest leaf litter – they thrive with little care.

Because many regions of San Diego offer these conditions, clivias are excellent plants for shaded sections of gardens. They are especially useful under trees where their shallow roots give little competition to tree roots and their water requirements are similar.

San Diego hybridizers

Why is such a useful plant also captivating collectors?

One reason is that the plants can be hybridized with relative ease by so-called backyard breeders.

"People breeding clivias may start with one or two plants and end up with many hundreds because of their enormous genetic variations," said Koopowitz, a renowned ecologist and horticulturist, professor of biology at UC Irvine and former director of its arboretum.

"Clivias are very plastic, malleable plants that are rapidly evolving. There's lots of interest in them all over the world."

In China and Japan, many clivia connoisseurs are more interested in leaves than flowers. In those countries, breeders are creating plants with leaves that have raised veins or round tips, or are variegated.

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Dave Conway has the largest number of named varieties in North America, approximately 180 varieties. Many are rare. He sells by mail or on site by appointment only. Prices range from \$10 to \$250 or more, depending on rarity. No Web site or catalog. Call for details and he'll send CD of current selections.

Walter Andersen Nursery

3642 Enterprise St.

San Diego

(619) 224-8271

12755 Danielson Court

Poway

(858) 513-4900

www.walterandersen.com

Current selections include orange-red *Clivia miniata*, San Marcos Yellow and Victorian Peach. Two-gallon plants in bud or bloom range from \$30 to \$50.

In the United States, breeders are concentrating on flower colors and flower forms, developing more yellow strains and soft pastel colors, while striving to create illusive purple flowers.

In Fallbrook, Victor Murillo has attracted attention with his creation of a series with pastel blooms. The most widely available is Victorian Peach, sold at local independent nurseries (including Walter Andersen) for approximately \$35.

Murillo, who is completely captivated by clivias, has 15,000 clivia plants at his Fallbrook home. His line is called Murillo's Exquisite Clivias and he sells seeds from his plants via the Internet to collectors around the world. In addition to novel colors, he's breeding plants with variegated green and white foliage and flowers with eight to 11 petals instead of the usual six. Some of his hybrids have a soft vanilla fragrance. Danielle is a selection with miniature butter-yellow flowers; his Green Eyed Lady has huge pumpkin-orange trumpets with pale green throats.

The 30-year-old plant devotee is among the youngest clivia breeders in the world. His family shares his passion and 9-year-old son Isaiah started breeding his own clivias this year.

"Victor is one of the up and coming stars of the clivia world," said Koopowitz. "We're quite excited about his work and it's amazing that he's able to get them on the market at such a reasonable price. In Japan, one of his pastel colored clivias would sell for \$400, which in that country is considered a reasonable price."

Joe Solomone is a renowned California hybridizer and founder of Monterey Bay Nursery, which he sold in 1988. He was one of the first people to breed yellow clivia and created the Solomone hybrids, which also include pastels, reds and oranges.

Another respected clivia breeder is Randy Baldwin, owner of San Marcos Growers wholesale nursery. He's created a strain of yellow-flowered clivia known as San Marcos Yellow.

Reason for rarity

However, collectors prefer rare clivias that can command prices in the hundreds of dollars.

The reason for the rarity lies in the growth habit of the plants. While they are very tough and free from diseases and pests, they are hard to replicate precisely.

Each flowering plant sets many seeds, up to 100 or more per bloom cycle, depending on plant size. These seeds germinate easily, but there are slight differences among offspring. For this reason, each seedling technically is a different plant and would be named as a new cultivar or variety. So in addition to cultivar names, strains of plants are designated, such as Monrovia nursery's Flame or San Marcos Yellows.

Buyers should know that plants are guaranteed to produce flowers in the specified colors but there will be slight variations from plant to plant, in terms of flower shapes, depth of color or foliage. Yet for those wanting landscape plants or single specimen plants, these slight distinctions make little difference.

Collectors who breed single plants may sell divisions of these named cultivars, as does Dave Conway, a longtime hybridizer in Santa Barbara. He sells approximately 180 named varieties, the largest number in North America. If plants don't meet his breeding goals, he sells divisions for as low as \$10 each. However, there's a waiting list for some of his choice varieties, with prices surging into the hundreds of

dollars.

Clivias are also excellent candidates for container plants, outdoor plants or as houseplants, because they thrive in low light and flower better when root bound. In containers, plants need protection from direct sunlight, more frequent irrigation than in the ground, and occasional fertilizing with a balanced fertilizer. Whether in the ground or in a pot, clivias will reward their guardians with spectacular spring blooms that can last from three to six weeks.

Some plants provide a second set of blooms in fall. All offer year-round attractive deep green foliage. Karen Dardick is a Southern California author and freelance garden writer.

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