

A Greener View: Clivia plants will bloom with proper care

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: I have several healthy clivia in pots in my living room. They used to have beautiful big blooms on tall stalks. The last few years they've had virtually no stalk and only stunted little flower heads buried deep in the crown of leaves.

What am I doing wrong?

A: Clivia lilies, also known as Kaffir lilies, are native to South Africa where the name Kaffir is a perjorative. The genus Clivia was named after Duchess Charlotte Clive. It rhymes with hive, but most people pronounce it as though it rhymes with give.

Common plant names are often mixed up around the world and some people wish everyone would just use botanical names to end the confusion, but botanists often change the botanical names as well. In this case, the genus Clivia was changed to Hesperantha a couple of years ago; however, I still see the plant listed as Clivia in my most recent catalogs.

This plant can be grown similarly to Amaryllis bulbs. They are both from the South African climate that receives summer rains and then cooler and dry winter conditions. They have long strap-like leaves and clusters of trumpet-shaped flowers on tall stalks. The Clivias are usually shades of orange, yellow and pink. They are much smaller but more numerous than Amaryllis flowers.

They need to be in climate conditions that are similar to where they are from. Place these plants outside in a shady north or east side location to mimic the forest conditions they grow in. Leave them outside in the fall until the weather has turned cool, but don't let them get any frost. Bring them inside and don't water them, or at most keep the soil just barely damp for a couple of months. Then cut off any dead leaves and start watering them again. They should bloom fine.

Mature Clivia plants produce several sets of leaves and then a flower stalk. The cycle of leaves and flowers will repeat; however, unless the plant has the dormant cycle of dry weather, the flower buds will not mature and bloom. I think this may be your problem, if it is not in need of repotting.

They tend to bloom better if they have been in the same pot for several years. From seeds, it takes a couple of years for a transplanted or new plant to bloom. If they have been in the pot too long, they use up the soil nutrients and need to be repotted. Use sterile soil high in organic matter and repot in the spring. Fertilize regularly over the summer with a blooming-type fertilizer. Don't let them sit in water during the summer, as they are sensitive to root rot. Therefore, leave off the saucer.

I like lily family plants. I have enjoyed clivias in the past, so I may have to go to my local greenhouse and buy some more. If you want the newest varieties, you can go to eBay to buy seeds; however, then you have to wait for several years to get them up to blooming size. They are good houseplants for just about everyone and they grow well outside in the South.

PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

This is the time of year many of us have outdoor tulips and other spring bulbs blooming. We can't buy more bulbs until fall, and by then we will have forgotten what the spring display looked like and exactly where it is in the garden.

Take pictures now of what you have blooming in order to plan better in the fall. This is especially true for all of the gardeners in the Midwest and East Coast areas that had record warm spells in March. The temperatures pushed spring flowers into bloom, which were then killed by April's record cold.

BULB BUYING

Now is the time to start thinking of summer bulbs to buy. Most gardeners have tried cannas, gladiolus, dahlias and other common summer bulbs. Let me suggest a few that you might not have tried.

Last summer I received a few test bulbs from Brent and Becky Heath in Gloucester, Va. If you want unusual bulbs for any season, check out www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com

My *Eucomis* bulbs are summer bloomers known as the Pineapple Lily. It has flowers that look like a pineapple is going to grow from the top of the 15-inch stalk. This tropical bulb grows in zones 7 through 10 and is treated as an annual or dug up in the fall in northern gardens.

Caladiums are common shady annuals in the South, but they also make long lasting houseplants and are good in the shallow edge of water gardens. They have bright red, white, pink and green leaves that provide color in shady locations. Every garden that is not hot and sunny has a place for a caladium. They are summer bulbs except for year-round planting in zones 10 and 11. Lake Placid, Fla., contains almost the entire U.S. crop. Brent and Becky have some rare caladiums from Thailand.

Calla lilies are not just for vases anymore. They used to be just white, but now they are pink, orange, purple and two-tone flowers. They are summer bulbs for everyone except gardeners in zones 8 through 10.

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