

Cast Iron Plant Excels in Shady Gardens



Photo to be credited to David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Aspidistra, commonly called cast iron plant, is very easy to grow as long as it doesn't receive too much direct sunlight.

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A few weeks ago a friend called and asked if I had ever seen the blooms of Aspidistra. I replied that I had not, so I seized the opportunity and my camera and rushed right over. She had been separating her aspidistra and in doing so had discovered the magenta flowers that are produced at ground level.

Aspidistra is one of those plants that has been with us so long that we tend to look upon it as one of our own. Such places as Eden State Park , Alfred B. Maclay State Gardens , and other historical homes and gardens make extensive use of the long-lived, tough perennial. It can be found gracing the grounds underneath Spanish-moss draped live oaks and in the deep shade of spreading magnolias throughout the South.

Introduced into this country in 1824, Aspidistra caught on quickly as a favorite in smoky barrooms and Victorian parlors. Today it remains a popular choice as gardeners take advantage of its cast iron constitution. Glossy, dark-green leaves two to three feet long and six to eight inches wide adorn shady spots in many Southern gardens.

Before planting aspidistra in the landscape, prepare the ground by breaking up the soil well and adding generous amounts of organic matter if your soil is very sandy. Plant aspidistra in deep shade, and be sure to keep it moist until it is well established. Though it is drought tolerant and survives with even the most abject neglect after establishment, it thrives when given moist soil and an occasional application of fertilizer.

Once a year or so, old or tattered leaves may be removed. As a matter of fact, if the planting really starts looking ratty, cut it all back to the ground in spring before the new leaves appear. New growth will soon emerge, and it will be as attractive as ever.

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Only very rarely do such pests as caterpillars, scale, mites, or sometimes slugs and snails, need to be controlled. The most common problem seen on aspidistra is just yellowing of the foliage when it is planted in a site that receives too much sun. One word of caution should be mentioned about aspidistra. Paper wasps love to make nests in it because the broad leaves give them protection from rainfall. This doesn't usually cause any problems, but before you begin pruning or working in your aspidistra, it is advisable to give the clumps of aspidistra a few whacks with a broom to locate the wasp nests so that you can avoid them.

Aspidistra is often planted in containers and used as a porch or patio plant. Tolerance to low light levels makes it suitable for interior spaces where little light is available. It makes a great accent or edging plant for a shady area and is a superb background for low-growing flowering annuals. Florists and floral designers have long favored it as foliage material in their designs. Cut leaves are very long lasting and can be wired, cut, bent, or twisted in a variety of ways.

Aspidistra is most easily propagated by division. Cut away a vigorous section of rhizome which has an actively growing tip. Alternatively, dig an entire clump and divide it by pulling apart or cutting with a sharp knife. Plant the divisions in a freshly prepared bed or container.

The common green-leafed *Aspidistra elatior* is most common, but the cultivar 'Variegata' or 'Okame' sports leaves with varied widths of green and white stripes. 'Asah' has leaves that turn white in the upper third after it reaches maturity. 'Stars and Stripes' exhibits a combination of yellow-green stripes and white spots. 'Sei Ryu Ho' is a rare cultivar that has elongated yellowish spots and a brushing of white streaks at the top of the leaf. Other species of *Aspidistra* also exist, including *A. lurida*, which includes the cultivar 'Milky Way', as well as the lesser known *A. caespitosa*, *A. minutiflora*, *A. typica*, and *A. linearifolia*.

All of these cultivars make aspidistra a much sought after plant these days. It may be time to take another look at the indomitable cast iron plant.

At a Glance

Aspidistra elatior

Say: ass-pi-DISS-truh ee-LAY-tee-or

Family: Liliaceae (Lily family)

Other names: Cast-iron plant, barroom plant, iron plant

Origin: Eastern Asia, China

Zones: 7-11

Light: Shade

Water Use Zone: Moderate to Low

Size: 2-3 feet tall

Soil: Organic preferred, but also grows well in poor soil. Must be well-drained.

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Salt tolerance: Moderate

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