

Plant a Toad Lily in a Shady Place



Photo by Marie Harrison

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Whenever I think of *Tricyrtis*, I think of the story that my friend Dara once told me. Not so long ago a tornado struck her and her husband Lloyd's property. It destroyed parts of their home as well as many trees. It was necessary for them to bring in heavy equipment to remove the rubble.

As the workers removed stumps of the fallen trees, Dara noticed that some of her favorite perennials were being ripped from the ground along with the tree stumps. She was able to endure it with no major traumas until she saw her favorite *Tricyrtis* being removed. "Oh, no!" she screamed, as she waved and motioned frantically to the workers. "Not my toad lilies! Please don't hurt my toad lilies."

The workers stopped momentarily, thinking that Dara had most likely lost her mind. Never having heard of toad lilies, one can only wonder what sort of lily they envisioned.

Toad lily (*Tricyrtis hirta*) is a hardy perennial that blooms in fall. Orchid-like white blossoms flecked with purple are clustered in the leaf axils down the length of the stems. While the flowers are unusual and interesting, they are present for a short time. The arching form and row upon row of attractive, lance-shaped leaves are the main attractions. Roots are rhizomatous, and plants spread slowly to form modest clumps. Although slugs can occasionally be troublesome, plants are rabbit and deer resistant.

Plant toad lilies in moist, well-drained, slightly acid soil rich in organic matter. Best performance will be evidenced by plants grown in deep shade. For groundcover effect, place plants about three feet apart so that the arching form of each plant can be appreciated. Mulch well with organic mulch.

Water as needed to maintain moisture. Fertilize in spring with balanced, slow-release fertilizer or organic foods like fish emulsion diluted to half strength. Over fertilization may cause burned leaf tips.

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Toad lily can be divided in early spring before new growth begins. Lift the clump, separate the roots, and replant each division in humusy soil. Seeds can be planted but need stratification over the winter. In ideal situations, plants self seed. Stem cuttings taken in early summer root easily at stem nodes. Root cuttings also yield new plants.

According to which taxonomist is consulted, the genus *Tricyrtis* has about 20 different species. *T. hirta* and *T. formosana* are commonly available, and *T. bakerii* and *T. flava* can sometimes be found at specialist nurseries. Among the other species are *T. macropoda*, *T. affinis*, *T. latifolia* and *T. macranthopsis*. Several named cultivars are offered by nurseries and mail-order sources. Wayside Gardens offers *T.* ‘Miyazaki’ and *T.* ‘Amethystina’. There is also a variegated form which has leaves with cream-colored edges.

Tricyrtis is excellent in shady borders, woodland gardens, and naturalized areas. Place along pathways where flowers can be seen at close range. Obtain plants from mail order sources such as Wayside Gardens, or ask your favorite nursery to order them for you. Many independently owned nurseries will be happy to place a special order.

However you get them, I hope that they will be spared the fate of Dara’s toad lilies. Maybe they’ll be more like mine, which have stayed in their shady spot for many years and have delighted me with their unusual blossoms and graceful, arching form. Perhaps they will be as beautiful as Dara’s were before the storm.

Say: try-SER-tis HER-tyh

Family: Liliaceae (Lily family)

Other names: *Tricyrtis*

Origin: Asia

Zones: 5-9

Light: Full shade

Water use zone: Moderate

Size: 24 to 30 inches by 1.5 to 2 feet

Soil: Moist, well-drained, humus rich

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