Clivias can take tough love - but a little tenderness goes a long way.
Michael Barrett, President, Melbourne Clivia Group Inc
By Megan Backhouse
19 August 2016

Say the words "dry-shade" and one of the first plants to spring to mind is the Clivia. These strappy-leaved South African stalwarts can hold up for years in a dim, parched corner and still produce sunny umbels of bell-shaped flowers from about now.

You find them steadily multiplying in abandoned gardens or in soils thick with tree roots. But resilient as the Clivia might be, collector Michael Barrett insists the genus comes into its own with attention.

A creamy Clivia in Michael Barrett's garden.
Photo: Eddie Jim

He fertilises and waters them and keeps an eye out for mealybugs in their foliage and snails on their new flowers. He makes sure the light levels are just right to ensure the leaves remain a deep glossy green. This last point is more difficult than you might imagine, given Barrett's garden is positively bathed in sunshine.
But his devotion to the plant came before his house, and so he makes the most of a side path and two shade houses.

*Clivia collector Michael Barrett in his garden.*
*Photo: Eddie Jim*

"Nothing depresses me more than when you see a Clivia growing in a bad spot," he says. "They can take a bit of morning sun, but they definitely don't need western afternoon sun. They can burn."

Grown properly, the Clivia is a "really handsome looking plant", he says. "I like the colours of the flowers, the beautiful foliage, the shapes and forms." He also likes creating hybrids, delving into their past and collecting related ephemera (a Clivia-decorated 1940 cigarette card, for instance).

Barrett was about 40 when he got into Clivias but is "one of the younger" members of the Melbourne Clivia Group, of which he is now president. "But you can never be too young to get into growing them," he says. "Especially if you want to breed for a few generations.

"It takes nine months to a year for a pollinated plant to grow a mature seed, then it can take up to five years for the seed to grow into a plant that flowers. And it can be 10 years if you think about a second cross."
Clivias under cover in Michael Barrett’s garden.  
*Photo: Eddie Jim*

While there are only six species in the *Clivia* genus, there are thousands of hybrids. The first to be recorded was the *Clivia x cyrtanthiflora*, bred in Europe in the 19th century between *C. nobilis* and *C. miniata*.

With late winter-early spring being an ideal time to plant Clivia seeds, Barrett now has several heated propagation trays on the go in his indoor sunroom. To create hybrids, he transfers the pollen of one plant to the stigma of another, then harvests the resulting berry, which contains numerous seeds about the size of a pea.

*A Clivia flower prepares to burst forth.  *  
*Photo: Eddie Jim*
"It's part-science and part-art," he says. "You get excited about what you can produce. Seeing a Clivia flower for the first time is a big unveiling. You might expect bigger blooms or multi petals or green flowers combined with variegated leaves."

There are endless variations, with flowers in everything from safety-vest orange to burned bronze, peach, yellow, cream, or combinations. Some flowers have green throats while others develop a trunk-like stem and those bred in Belgium before the First World War have extra-broad leaves.

"People send you lists of seed crosses and it makes a salacious read. It's like reading a menu where you want to eat everything."

But sometimes breeders hit on such a winning combination that they don't want it to change. The only way to produce an identical Clivia is to remove offsets, as even the seed of the plant won't be true.

While Barrett has hundreds of potted Clivias, his aim is to create a sustainable collection with only the "best examples" of various flower colours and leaf forms.

"The difference between collecting plants and Carlton Ware – which I went through a phase with as well – is that plants need attention. I want a collection that I can house and care for properly."

The Melbourne Clivia Group is holding an Expo on September 24, 10am to 4pm, St Scholastica’s Community Centre, 384 Burwood Highway, Bennettswood.

www.melbournecliviagroup.org.au