Like parents with their children, gardeners often have a favourite among all the plants that they grow. Without doubt my great horticultural love is Clivia, most especially the cream ones.

They are perennials in the Amaryllidaceae family, related to naked ladies and hippeastrums. There are only six actual Clivia species, the best-known being Clivia miniata, mainly the orange one, usually grown in massed planting. They have shiny, dark green strap-like leaves, which grow from a central crown, sending out babies (pups) on the side.
Here I want to give a very brief history of the plant and, more importantly, some advice on how to grow them based on my own experience. I have been growing them for over thirty years. However, not all I do, I fear, would be sanctioned by traditional Clivia growers and breeders!

Many gardeners know that the Clivia is named after Lady (Charlotte) Clive, the Duchess of Northumberland. The reason the plant was named after her was because, after it was first taken to England in the early 1800’s, she was the first person to produce flowers. There is some confusion as to how to pronounce Clivia. Most commonly, people say cly – vee – aah.

Clivia grow naturally in southern Africa (South Africa and Swaziland), and do well if given shade and are not exposed to extreme cold or humidity. They will not tolerate frosts. Direct sun should be avoided at all costs.

Clivia are incredibly good cut flowers. Some flowers I have cut have lasted almost two weeks in a vase. The berries are also very ornamental and can be used in flowering arrangements, too.
Clivia make an outstanding flower for vases.

Belgium hybrids add a splash of colour indoors and last well after cutting.
Cream Clivia berries.

Cream Clivia.
Lots of variety

The range of colours and sizes is extraordinary. Colour-wise, besides the creams, yellow, pinks, oranges, and reds, there are bicolour flowers, which can be very dramatic. There are also green flowering cultivars. Clivia Nobilis, the first that Lady Charlotte made flower in Britain, has almost weeping flowers that are orange, green and yellow, all on the same flower.
This is a pink Clivia bought at Bunnings.

The size of leaves and flowers is also quite variable. Some flowers are almost spider like, while others are truly flouncy and dramatically large. Leaves can also vary greatly from belt thin to wide with large rounded tips.

Bicolour hybrids in bloom.
I believe this is Col Pitman Clivia.

There are also variegated plants, where their leaves, flowers and berries all share this trait. Even the variegations can vary, on leaves, even to banding, or in the variation of the amount of cream and shades of green they present.
There is Clivia cultivar called ‘Twins’. It has usually has two flowers on the same plant, usually at the same time, and is a dwarf form of the Belgium hybrid.

Twins Clivia.
Clivia miniata is the most widely grown, but the grandiflora Clivia are also often found in a temperate climate. The showier Belgium or Dutch hybrids are the ones with bigger darker orange flowers, strong leaves and darker berries.
Belgium hybrids massed.
Growing conditions

Apart from their hatred of a full sun position and dislike for humidity, Clivia are surprisingly easy going about where they are growing. They are semi-epiphytic (air plants) with roots, at a glance, not dissimilar to cymbidium orchids. I have dug Clivia up, left them in in plastic pots for over four months without compost, soil or potting mix, and they have not only thrived but also flowered, with the addition of just a little water.

Developing roots when left in a pot without medium.
This pink Clivia has been in this pot for over a year without compost or any other plant media and it is not only growing fine but has also flowered.

When I pot Clivia I never use potting mix, but prefer orchid compost, used with great success. I am unsure how Clivia growers would feel about this, but know it works well for me. I am also intending
to trial a Clivia on a tree fern with a pouch of peat moss. At present the drought in Sydney is stopping me!

Freshly potted Clivia in orchid compost.
Clivia, when grown in the ground, thrive on compost, leaf litter and mulch. Although they probably would grow happily on concrete, they do need good drainage if planted in the ground, and heavy clay soils should be avoided.
Watering and feeding

Clivia are generally quite a drought tolerant plant and, it has been suggested to me that not watering them, or watering sparingly, in winter will encourage better flowering (probably by stressing them). When established they only need to be watered occasionally and will still grow well enough with neglect.

Feeding Clivia, in my experience, will help flowering. I apply a pelleted feed a couple of times a year, and a foliar feed every couple of weeks. However, I should point out that Ken Smith, a very talented Clivia grower and former TAFE teacher of mine, did a study on feeding Clivia a few years ago and could not find any consistent feeding program that worked.

Pests and diseases

The greatest downfall of Clivia is that it does have some nasty enemies. Mealy bug and aphids can attack them from time to time. However, their greatest nemesis is the lily or amaryllis caterpillar. This can attack any member of the Amaryllidaceae family, but seems, unfortunately, to prefer clivia.

The caterpillar prefers dry conditions, so be more vigilant in these periods. The caterpillar is less active in the colder months, too. The moth, about 5 cm across, lays lots of eggs so the damage done can be catastrophic if the caterpillars are not found early after they hatch. If not found, they eat all the leaves down into the crown of the plant. Cutting off leaves that are affected, with the caterpillars on them, can help a lot if the attack is found early.

Amaryllis caterpillar or borer, Brithys crini. Photo: Jon Richfield, CC License
When I got my first cream Clivia, almost thirty years ago, it was expensive and came from South
Australia by post. I kept dividing it until I had six and then more. I have been lucky enough to have
given a great many away, too. Also, I have bought more over the years, especially to get better
flowers (for example, Clivia miniata ‘Col Pitman’ is a cultivar with a lovely showy flower).

Thus, division is a sensible exercise if you wish for your collection to grow. Also, if plants are left
undisturbed for years they can continue to grow, but often will flower less. As with most clumping
perennials, division encourages vigour and flowering. In fact, if plants are left undivided for too many
years there is a greater danger of them rotting in humid weather.

When you need to divide plants, dig up the clump with a spade or pitchfork. Often there will be two
or three good size plants in the clump, plus a few pups (the cute name for the offshoots). With a
below ground saw or old kitchen knife neatly trim the roots, cut through the plants, trying to keep as
much root attached, and separate the pups.

The plants can be potted up (and, as I said, I use orchid compost), but watering must be limited if
they are potted as there is a great danger the newly potted plants may rot. I always apply seaweed
extract and the fungicide phosacid when first watering to help new root growth and general vigour,
and to help prevent fungal attack (such as phytophthora). Make sure, too, that you do not put the
plants in too big a pot. You can always pot them up when their root ball is more developed.

If you are planting into the soil add organic matter, such as well-rotted compost, eucalyptus bark (or
similar), and some pelleted fertiliser. Again, water with seaweed extract and phosacid, and water
sparingly after that.
Red berries.
Propagating Clivia from seed

Obviously, Clivia can be grown from seed, but keep in mind that they will not always be true to type (remember Mendel’s Law re chromosomes). I have never produced a cream flower when I have grown mine from seed, even though I grow all my cream Clivia together. Indeed, it is a good idea to keep different colours separate to each other to discourage cross-pollination.

Besides their attractive flowers, Clivia also have beautiful berries that colour to suit whichever colour the flowers were. Thus, cream flowering plants have cream berries, variegated ones have variegated fruit, and red ones have red berries and so on.

Inside each berry there are often two to four seeds. I ‘squish’ open the outside membrane and put the seeds on the top of potting mix, pressing them in very slightly. It can take weeks, even months, for the seeds to germinate so be patient. Water occasionally, but nothing else is required.

Ken Smith once told me, of plants you have germinated from seed, that it is possible to tell what colour their flowers will be up until about a year into the growth. If you are trying to grow cream Clivia, for example, the base of the seedling should be cream. If red or pink, they will eventually flower orange.

After a year apparently, it is impossible to tell what colour the flowers will be, regardless of the colour of the crown base. I have found this to be true. As it can take plants three years until they flower, it is worth knowing this fact.
In conclusion, Clivia are attractive, easy to grow plants that produce stunning flowers of an amazing array of colour. If insect attack is monitored this should not be a problem. Their flowers are good for
cutting, but also provide a dramatic display in the garden. Clivias need little water or feeding but must be grown in the shade. Little wonder they are my firm favourite!

Single Red Clivia.

Pink Clivia.
Wow!

About Bernard Chapman

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