

BLACKBERRY - LILY, A FLOWERING PERENNIAL FOR SOUTH FLORIDA

prepared by Joe Garofalo

Belamcanda chinensis.

This species has previously been placed in the genera *Pardanthus*, *Ixia* and *Gemmingia*. The common name “blackberry-lily” comes from the shape of the mature fruit; the other common name, “leopard-lily” is for the spotted flowers. A member of the Iris family (Iridaceae), *Belamcanda* (an Asian name for this plant) is native to China, Japan, and Korea.

BIOLOGY

Belamcanda is an herbaceous perennial with stout rhizomes, which grows to three ft or so. It is listed in catalogs as a perennial or as a bulb or geophyte. The leaves are Iris-like, basal, and attached to a short stem, in fans, up to about twelve inches long and one inch wide. The plant as a whole looks very much like a small iris, but the species is separated from *Iris* by having undivided style arms. Though they are naturally deciduous, they are evergreen in our climate.

Flowers are borne in large numbers in a much-branched inflorescence that is dichotomous to loosely corymbose. They are sometimes recommended for cutting, but because the flowers are short-lived and open over a period of several weeks, the overall display of a cut spray is limited, and cutting would remove numerous buds.

The flowers are orange, with reddish to brownish spots, up to about two inches across on short stalks. They are hermaphroditic (bisexual), and star-shaped, with the perianth segments (tepals) pointed at the tips, the petals slightly larger than the sepals, and the filaments reddish-purple. Flowers open in late morning and close the same day, twisting spirally as they fade. The six segments stand apart (or rarely overlap), and are about equal in length, thus the flower is regular. Prominent in the center of the

flower, the long style branches into three short stigmas, which are held well above the stamens.

The fruit is a capsule with 3 chambers. At maturity the valves are reflexed, exposing a column covered with glossy black seeds. This structure very much resembles a blackberry, and it remains intact for an indefinite period (months or years). This is what gives the plant the common name “blackberry-lily.” Fruiting branches are often used in dried arrangements, and last for months.

Rhizomatous Irises branch at ground level, perpetuating and increasing the size of the clumps, but *Belamcanda* does not. Instead, once the seeds ripen, the shoot which bore them dies completely. The clump is perpetuated only if seedlings replace those seeding and dying. This behavior fits the definition of a monocarpic species, but this descriptive term is not used in the literature. In South Florida *Belamcanda* is a short-lived perennial.

LANDSCAPE USE & CULTURE

Experience over more than thirty years of growing blackberry-lilies all over the South has shown that they perform well in the upper and middle South, but not so well along the upper coast of the Gulf of Mexico. In that region, which includes North Florida, they behave as short-lived perennials. A planting can be maintained only if it is constantly renewed by planting some seed every year. Without such renewal they die out within two or three seasons.

In South Florida they not only grow and survive well, but are evergreen and tend to bloom throughout the year. *Belamcanda* grows best for us in light to moderate shade. Good drainage is required, or the plants rot. Some organic matter

should be incorporated if the soil is sandy or rocky, but good drainage is a must.

Propagation is by seed, which may be planted any time they are available. They bloom within a year, and often within six months if grown well—that is, if they are watered as needed and fertilized lightly but frequently (monthly). Division of clumps is also practiced, as is the transplanting of volunteers, both of which may be done at any time of year. Though a few volunteers survive in beds kept free of weeds, there appears to be no escape to the wild—seedlings can’t compete.

If they become crowded, clumps should be divided every third or fourth year to maintain flower size and number. A permanent but light organic mulch should be maintained. Be careful not to cover the crown, or it will rot.

This plant is very easy to grow, very drought-tolerant once established, and is in bloom nearly year-round in South Florida. A small planting at the University of Florida - Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center has thrived for more than eight years, and a clump at the Miami-Dade Cooperative Extension Service office in Homestead has done well for four.

RELATED SPECIES TO TRY

B. flabellata.

Dwarf blackberry-lily. Often sold as the cultivar ‘Hello Yellow’. This one is similar to *B. chinensis*, except as follows. It is a dwarf form, with stems reaching only 12-20 inches. The flowers are slightly larger and clear yellow; they may be lightly spotted orange, but if so, only at the bases of the segments. The filaments are white. The perianth segments are more rounded at the tip, and perhaps slightly wider, giving the flower a fuller appearance. This species is

reported as first collected in Japan.

It has been grown in South Florida on a small scale, thriving for over four years in Homestead. The original plants were obtained from a nursery in the North Carolina mountains, and are growing well. They were slow becoming established, but have bloomed each year, ripening a few seeds. These seeds produced healthy plants which have grown well.

They have remained dwarf, just over twelve inches. They went completely dormant in November of the first year, dropping all their leaves. After that first Winter, they have been semi-evergreen. This species is definitely worth trying on a larger scale. They would make good perennials for the front of the bed or border.

From time to time several other color variants, on both tall and dwarf plants, are offered for sale as seeds. ‘Freckle Face’ is orange with distinct spots.

CANDY-LILIES

A reported bi-generic hybrid, sold as *x Pardancanda norrisii*, or “candy-lily,” is probably not a true bi-generic hybrid, but one or more hybrids of color variants of the two species within the genus *Belamcanda*. The name is a combination of *Pardanthus* and *Belamacanda*, which are synonyms for the blackberry-lily.

These are reported to be hardier than the parent species, though that doesn’t concern us in South Florida. They are perhaps six inches shorter than the typical *Belamcanda*, and come in bicolors and selfs (all one color), often polka-dotted or streaked, and in shades of blue, purple, yellow, orange, red, pink, and very pale yellow. The color combinations are really interesting and varied. Some of these have

wide, overlapping floral segments, and some of the flowers are a bit larger.

These have been grown and sold by a few nurseries, but no one has any long-term data for South Florida. Also, plants grown from *x Pardancanda* seeds have always turned out to be either candy-lilies or something very close to that species. Perhaps we're seeing some selection by climate.

This group of plants is clearly worth trying since it increases the color range, and through the selection of desired forms and colors, may yield some interesting cultivars. Seedling populations often vary somewhat in height, so there is also the potential of selecting for tall, intermediates and dwarfs. A breeding program with candy-lilies and the two blackberry-lilies would make an excellent project for a nurseryman or dedicated hobby grower.

AVAILABILITY

Plants of *Belamcanda* are occasionally available in South Florida at nurseries which specialize in uncommon perennials. They are sold as candy-lilies, but appear to be blackberry-lilies.

Both seeds and plants are sold by most of the nationally-known seed and plant companies, through their wholesale and retail catalogs. Plants tend to be rather expensive, but seeds are reasonably priced. The plants produce a generous crop of seeds if they are well-grown in semi-shade.

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SUMMARY

The three plants discussed, the blackberry-lily, *Belamcanda chinensis*; dwarf blackberry-lily, *B. flabellata*; and candy-lily, *x Pardancanda norrisii*, are a group of closely related species which have the potential of becoming popular, sought-after perennials for gardens in South Florida, and thus are

a potential new crop for nurseries in the area. Presently they are only rarely seen.

Of the three, the blackberry-lily is the proven success, and the other two are likely to do well also, based on the limited data presently available. All three offer the greatest potential if grown from seed and selected for desirable traits, including flower production and evergreen foliage.

These perennials are recommended for trial by home gardeners. The blackberry-lily has a longer track-record here, is known to perform well in South Florida, and is especially recommended. Nurserymen interested in this species should consider growing a few on a trial basis, looking both at performance and market potential. Probably the only reason *Belamcanda* is not seen more in South Florida is that both gardeners and growers don't know about it and don't know how well it performs in our climate.

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Selected References

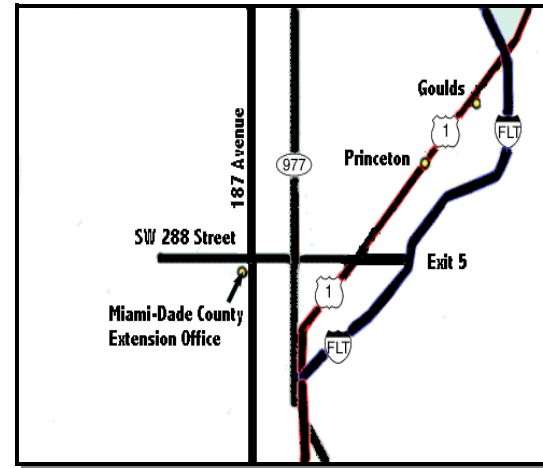
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In Writing

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