

CLIVIAS – PART 3

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Belonging to the Amaryllidaceae family, the genus *Clivia* is native to northeastern and the eastern seaboard of South Africa. It was in 1828, in the conservatory of Lady Clive, Duchess of Northumberland, that the first *Clivia* introduced to the western world flowered. This was actually *C. nobilis*, collected by the explorer and botanist William Burchell in the Eastern Cape and sent back to England. John Lindley of Kew Gardens named this new genus *Clivia*, to honour Lady Clive.

Of the six known species, *Clivia miniata*, (in 1854 the second to be named) and the one with the largest and showiest flowers, is the only one commonly grown in New Zealand. It is a long lived, semi-tender, evergreen rhizomatous perennial, very similar in size and appearance to *Agapanthus*, with trumpet-shaped flowers carried on stout stems in late winter/early spring. The colour range extends from deep orange-red through orange, apricot, peach and creamy yellow.

The other four species, *Clivia gardenii* (named 1856), *C. caulescens* (named 1943), *C. mirabilis* (named 2002), and *C. robusta* (named 2004), have, like *C. nobilis*, pendulous, tubular flowers in shades of red/orange/pinkish salmon, usually with greenish tips. *C. gardenii* is the first to flower in early winter, followed by *C. robusta*, *C. miniata*, *C. mirabilis*, then *C. nobilis* and *C. caulescens* in early summer.

Shade is an essential requirement of *Clivia*, and another is good drainage. They are very drought resistant, but the thick roots, adapted to conserve water, will not tolerate wet or soggy soils. In fact the roots do not penetrate deeply, but forage in the top 10 cm of loose topsoil and leaf litter falling from the overhead shade trees. *Clivia* are survivors and forgive complete neglect, but certainly respond by flowering more reliably if given an annual mulch of composted organic matter or animal manure.

If seed is set, it takes almost a year to ripen, the berries turning red, (or yellow if it is a yellow flowered form), after about ten months. A berry may contain up to 15 seeds, which are quite large and pearly white. These are relatively easy to germinate if left on top of a free draining mix in a shady

place that does not get too dry, and after one year you may be lucky to have small plants with two leaves approximately 10cm long. Plants will take three to five years to flower from seed, after they have produced 12 to 14 leaves. Once a plant has flowered, it usually begins to clump up. Mature plants can be divided, preferably when the offsets are of a reasonable size with roots of their own.

When the New Zealand Clivia Club (NZCC) was formed, many addicts emerged. There was a focal point now, and these individuals linked up and pooled knowledge and enthusiasm. Only since the Club's inception, and with the help from the South African *Clivia* Society, has the knowledge about the plant been expanded. The club has been very active, bringing overseas speakers to New Zealand, holding non-competitive shows in different parts of the country, initiating and funding some research into flower pigment, doing displays at various horticultural shows, organising social events and generally promoting and building awareness of *Clivia* to the gardening public. The NZCC has just under 150 members, and I don't foresee this increasing dramatically in the near future as our population is small.

I estimate that there are about 60 000 *Clivia* sold annually in New Zealand, with seed still being imported from South Africa, Europe, and USA as well as utilising New Zealand sourced material. Seed is generally sown in June, and seedlings sold in 5cm pots at ten months old, for NZ \$1.20. A two year plant in a two litre pot sells for about NZ \$12.00. Some plants are grown to flowering size, retailing at NZ \$25.00, but premium priced product is not in high demand.

There is currently a glut of *Clivia* available, brought about by optimistic estimates of the size of the market. While yellows were new, obviously demand was high, but there is now little premium for yellow plants as the novelty has gone, and large sales numbers have declined accordingly. Commercial nurseries need to work on space rental economics, and currently it is simply not profitable to grow *Clivia* to flowering size when the public are not prepared to pay a realistic price. Perhaps when the two year flowering strain from Belgium is introduced this may change.

The general public merely want a plant that looks pretty, or one that will do a job. They are not interested in breeding or background, and don't seem to like orange, preferring red. There is general interest in pastels, peaches, green throats and variegates, but these are not yet available in retail outlets,

and the few offered by specialist growers/breeders are quickly snapped up by collectors. Rare and novel plants are in demand, but the connoisseur market is extremely small, and not lucrative.

A few years ago two yellow clones were successfully put into tissue culture by Sandra Simpson of Multiflora Laboratories. She found that good pupping varieties also multiplied well in tissue, but that others were very slow. Plants ex tissue had to command a high price, which was economic briefly, but now that demand for yellows has dropped, and the price of seed is also low, it is far more economic to grow from seed than tissue. Opportunity still exists to tissue exceptionally good plants, but only if there is a strong demand for that particular clone.

There is little enthusiasm among *Clivia* breeders and growers here to formally name plants. Because demand is not great, and vegetative division is so slow, it is not considered worth doing. General consensus is that unless a plant or flower is different enough to be noticed from the back of a galloping horse, it does not warrant a name.

Who knows what the future of the clivia is? Things will change radically within the next five years due to the huge increase of diversity in the gene pool. Seeds have been sourced by enthusiasts from all around the world, and amateur hybridists are frantically cross pollinating here just as they are in Australia, Japan, USA, South Africa and UK. Undoubtedly some wonderful material will emerge from all these places, and yet the popularity of these glorious plants still depends upon the whim of the public.

The clivia is a plant that is non-demanding, looks tidy and attractive all year, doesn't quickly outgrow its allotted space, has beautiful flowers, and is a survivor. Perfect for the low maintenance garden of the future!

I would like to thank all the people mentioned in this article, and others I have spoken to while gathering data, for their help and willingness to pass on to me, and hence to you, the readers, their knowledge, enthusiasm, and love of *Clivia*. In particular I thank Keith Hammett, Ian Duncalf and Terry Hatch, and also Ross Fergusson of HortResearch Library Auckland, Sue Davison of Auckland Botanic Garden Library and Barbara Brownlie of the Alexander Turnbull Archives Library, Wellington.

Tony Barnes has been a keen gardener all his life, and a nurseryman for half of it. He and his partner, John Sole, have a large much visited garden Ngamamaku, near New Plymouth. Tony has been especially interested in *Clivia* for the last 10 years, and has spoken about clivias in New Zealand, at the International *Clivia* Conference in Pretoria, South Africa, and also in Changchun, China.

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