

# fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

## There's only one word for these exotic beauties: glorious!



**Gloriosa**  
*Gloriosa superba*

THE VERY FEATURES THAT make the gloriosa lily so striking in appearance also make it a flower that demands special consideration from designers. How do you work with a flower that hangs

upside-down from a slender vine, its recurving petals pointing upward as though blown back by a stiff breeze, each wavy-edged petal well separated from the others, and with five prominent stamens perpendicular to the petals (although, as the flower matures, they tend to

**Availability**  
year-round

**Vase life**  
5 to 10 days

displays, the gloriosa requires space around the bloom so that the flower head's distinctive form can be appreciated; at the same time, the individual flower stems are relatively short, while longer sections of gloriosa vine require external support. It's a challenge to be relished!

arch backward, following the petals' path)?

This is clearly not a bouquet-maker's flower. Typically reserved for weddings, special events, and dramatic floral

At Oregon Coastal Farms near Tillamook ([www.calla-lily.com](http://www.calla-lily.com)), gloriosas can be harvested from July through September (from other domestic growers, they may be available as early as April). The clambering vines require a support structure to which they cling with the tendrils that extend from the tips of their leaves. The blooms open from the bottom of the vine up and grow rich in color as they mature, so that in a red and yellow variety like Rothschildiana, the youngest flowers may be pale yellow and pink or salmon.



Left on the vine, a red and yellow gloriosa will keep changing color until the red turns to deep rose and completely suffuses the flower. Such a flower, although still lovely, is too mature to be harvested and sold.

## Family matters

Some purists insist that gloriosas should not be called lilies, because they are not members of the genus *Lilium*. Rather, they compose their own genus in the Liliaceae family. Like true lilies, they grow from bulbs; unlike their close relatives, they are climbing, twining vines that support their upward growth by clinging to other plants—or to a garden trellis—with the aid of tendrils extending from the tips of their lance-shaped leaves.

Vibrant color is a strong selling point for gloriosas. The most familiar variety, *Gloriosa superba* 'Rothschildiana' (also called *G. rothschildiana*), comes in vivid crimson with yellow edges. Other colors, however, are increasingly available, including pink with yellow edges, solid yellow, or solid orange. New on the market is a white variety, bred in Japan, called 'White Peal', supplied by Transflora (the broker and distributor of grower-direct flowers at [www.transflora.net](http://www.transflora.net)). All of these varieties begin as green buds and color up as the flowers mature, reaching a diameter of three to five inches.

Native to the tropical areas of Asia and Africa, gloriosas can be grown in semitropical gardens as well, and as far north as some temperate-zone areas with mild winters. Cut, greenhouse-grown gloriosas are available year-round from Holland (with limited availability in January). Many importers and wholesalers regard Holland as the first-choice source of supply. "The Dutch quality seems to be better than when we try to bring them in from anywhere else," says Jenna Vath of

Florabundance, a California-based direct shipper that sources flowers from all over the world ([www.florabundance.com](http://www.florabundance.com)).

## On and off the vine

Gloriosa lilies are also grown in the United States, however, and when they are in season—roughly from April through September—the domestic gloriosas may be less expensive. At Oregon Coastal Flowers in Tillamook ([www.calla-lily.com](http://www.calla-lily.com)), grower Patrick Zweifel typically sells gloriosas for \$8.50 for one bunch, which includes three long vines, for a total of nine to 15 flowers in the bunch.

From all sources, gloriosas may be purchased in one of two ways: You can buy single flowers (sometimes called "bouquet" or "posy" gloriosas) atop six- to eight-inch stems, packed five stems to a bunch. This is the length of the flower's own stem when it is cut from the vine. Or, you can buy sections of vine, 18 to 24 inches, with two to three flowers apiece. Within this long-stem category, some suppliers distinguish standard-grade from premium-grade gloriosas. The former have 18- to 20-inch stems, with just three to four flowers and buds; the latter should have 24-inch stems, with five or more flowers and buds.

At Oregon Coastal, "we ship on the vine," says Patrick. "These are subvines cut from the main stem of the plant. When we ship them they have at least one or two flowers open, but also at least three to five buds per vine, and there could be as many as eight or more buds that will continue to open up and develop—which gives the whole subvine a vase life of two to three weeks or more." Patrick also finds that the individual flowers last longer on the vine than they do as shorts.

Now, florists purchasing gloriosa are generally advised to buy only fully open flowers, as the blooms won't gain in color intensity after they have been harvested. And it's true that any flowers that open on the vine after it is cut won't be quite as rich in color, Patrick admits. You will see the same on vines from any source: the vine blooms from the bottom up, so the most vivid hues are to be found on the more mature flowers at the bottom.

Patrick added gloriosas to Oregon



Premium gloriosa hybrids from Japan include, from top to bottom, 'Red Misato', 'Zipang Sasayo', and 'White Peal'. These Japanese-bred and -grown flowers are available through Transflora, [www.transflora.net](http://www.transflora.net).



Coastal's other crops (mainly callas and hydrangeas) about eight years ago. His gloriosa season runs from July through September. "It took us a while to learn how to sell them," he says, but last summer was the best season yet.

Patrick purchases gloriosa bulbs from India, and these bulbs often produce variable hues and distinctive markings. "It's something different, not so uniform, and our customers like it," he reports. "The gloriosas on our lot cross-pollinate and you end up with an interesting mixture." Customers can ask for pink, yellow, red and yellow, or orange gloriosas. The last has proven highly popular, and not only in the fall.

## Out of the bag

Short and long gloriosa stems alike usually

come packed in clear plastic bags that have been filled with nitrogen gas. The nitrogen not only pads the bags, thus protecting the delicate flowers and stems inside, it helps to inhibit the development of ethylene gas and to keep the humidity around the flowers high. In lieu of the bags, Oregon Coastal Farms ships gloriosas in sleeves, three vines per bunch, with hydrangea liners that hold in moisture but allow the flowers to breathe.

Once removed from the bag, gloriosas warrant special care in processing and in design. They are best appreciated in simple, uncluttered designs where they can stand out against a contrasting backdrop. And as beautiful as they are, they should be kept away from children and pets who might try to eat them, since every part of the gloriosa plant contains a toxic chemical, the poisonous alkaloid colchicine. 🌿



Pure yellow (shown) and orange gloriosas are relatively new on the market, available from a variety of sources including Transflora ([www.transflora.net](http://www.transflora.net)), which supplied this specimen.

# care tips gloriosa

- Typically gloriosas are shipped in airtight, clear plastic bags (often filled with nitrogen) to prevent shipping damage to the blossoms. Carefully open the bags and remove the stems as soon they arrive to expel any ethylene gas that may have accumulated since the flowers were packed.
- For best color intensity, gloriosas should be purchased in full color. Make sure there are no yellow, brown or damaged petals.
- Re-cut stem ends and place in a tepid floral food solution. Since gloriosas are ethylene-sensitive, you should check with your supplier to make sure they have been treated to protect against the effects of ethylene gas; if not, you may wish to treat them yourself with a commercial ethylene-action inhibitor.
- Condition at room temperature for several hours or overnight. Store in a tropical cooler at 50 degrees F and 85% humidity. To attain maximum vase life, humidity should be kept high with frequent misting or by covering with a clear plastic bag.
- Though available year-round, gloriosas can also be grown to order if the supplier is given 12-14 weeks' notice of a specified delivery date.
- Gloriosa lilies have a high concentration of alkaloids in their sap, which may cause skin rashes or redness on people with high sensitivity or allergies.