



Curcuma

Name: *Curcuma* sp. (Zingiberaceae)

Common Name: Curcuma, Hidden or Surprise Ginger

Origin: Indo-Malayan region

Distribution: *Curcumas* are herbaceous perennials and are widely distributed in the tropics of Asia from India to South China, Southeast Asia, Papua New Guinea and Northern Australia.

Australian Distribution: *Curcumas* are commercially grown for cut flower in the Darwin region of the Northern Territory and in Northern Queensland. In addition, they are sold as potted flowering plants in nurseries and garden centres. *Curcumas* can be grown as far south as Sydney.

Preferred Climate and Soil Types: *Curcumas* like a moist well-drained soil with protection from the wind. Most *Curcumas* prefer part sun, but there are some that will take full sun. In winter or during the cooler drier months in Northern Australia, the plants die down and go dormant. During this dormant period plants left in the ground or pot need to be kept relatively dry and not wet as they may rot. Plants in the ground are best lifted from the soil after the foliage has died back and stored in a warm, dry place. Rhizomes can then be replanted in the garden or pot and watered normally in September/October when the temperature starts to increase. New shoots will re-emerge and the plant will start to produce flowers around November/December.

Description: *Curcuma* belongs to the ginger family Zingiberaceae that consists of a number of important economical members, as well as, important ornamental species. The most known economical member of this genus is *Curcuma longa*, used to make the spice turmeric.

Curcumas are herbaceous perennials with well developed rhizomes and often tuberous roots. Plants range in height from 30cm to 1.5 metre tall. A terminal inflorescence is produced ranging from 12cm up to 50cm long. The inflorescence is a conelike spike with spirally arranged bracts where the uppermost bracts called the coma are often brightly coloured and range from white, pink, burgundy red, orange or purple. From inside these bracts the 'true' flower emerges. These flowers are brightly coloured such as white to pink, yellow and shades of violet.

Varieties: There are a number of varieties derived from overseas breeding programs, particularly in Thailand, that are now available in Australia. A few of these varieties belong to the species *C. alsinatifolia* such as 'Thai Magic', 'Siam Tulip' and 'Siam White'. Other Thai varieties available in Australia include 'Jewel of Burma', 'Jewel of Thailand' and 'Siam Jewel' or 'Laddawan'. An attractive variety is 'Voodoo Magic' with striking dark purple mid vein coloured leaves and a purple inflorescence. There is also the local species from Northern Australia *C. australasica* or 'Cape York Lily' which range in colour from light pink to a dark pink/purple coloured inflorescence.

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Culture: *Curcumas* are vegetatively propagated by division of the rhizomes after the plant has died down and gone dormant. Care must be taken when dividing rhizomes to not break-off or damage any of the tuberous roots or storage roots attached to the primary rhizomes. These tuberous or storage roots are what stores the nutrients that provides the energy for the plant to regrow. Some species do set seeds and the seedlings can be variable. Seeds are best sown fresh and may take 3 to 4 weeks to germinate.

Pests and Diseases: A major pest of *Curcuma* is caterpillars that can cause severe damage to the plant and inflorescence if not controlled. Other minor pests are grasshoppers that chew the leaves and ants which chew the edges of the inflorescence bracts. Rhizomes are prone to bacterial rots if grown in poor free draining soil conditions, and if the rhizome is regularly watered while dormant.

The *C. alismatifolia* varieties are susceptible to a fungus disease that causes tiny brown spots usually on the inflorescence bracts and stem, and in some cases spotting on the leaves. Some varieties are highly susceptible to this fungal spotting and can cause serious damage to flower quality. This spotting usually becomes a problem when increased wet and humid conditions are experienced.

Harvesting: The stem of the inflorescence and surrounding leaves are usually cut at ground level to thin out the clumps and allow more light into the beds.

Post-Harvest: To prolong the vase life, flowers should be picked early in the morning and placed in water as soon as possible. Most inflorescences will keep for up to 7 days with some lasting up to 2 weeks.

Websites:

Palmwood Tropicals

www.palmwoodtropicals.com.au

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