


# Captivating Toad Lilies

BY BILL JOHNSON



Once you get past the common name, the tiny, jewellike flowers of these shade-loving herbaceous perennials will enchant you.

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I recall laughing out loud the first time I heard the name “toad lily,” even though I understood it was another in a long list of crazy common names humans have bestowed on plants. Toad lilies are in the genus *Tricyrtis*, and while they are not technically lilies, they are in the lily family (Liliaceae). There are a number of different accounts of how its common name came to be, but the most reasonable version, at least in my mind, is that the spots on the flowers resemble the skin of some toads.

But don’t let the common name deter you from growing these lovely

shade-loving herbaceous perennials, because their late summer- to fall-blooming flowers are stunningly beautiful, and these delicate-looking plants are surprisingly hardy. When I saw my first toad lily flower, with all its crazy architectural structures, I thought that it looked like a cross between an ornate orchid and a passionflower (*Passiflora* sp.).

There are about 20 species of toad lilies native to forests and moist grasslands in Japan, Taiwan, China, India and neighboring regions in eastern Asia, but only a couple are commonly found at

garden centers. These are Formosa toad lily (*T. formosana*, syn. *T. stolonifera*) and common toad lily (*T. hirta*). A few of the other species are available through specialty mailorder nurseries (see “Sources,” page 31). In addition to the species, dozens of hybrids and selections have been introduced by nursery owners and plant breeders. Some have variegated leaves and others feature intriguing flower colors or patterns. I’ve provided comments on a few of the species and selections I have grown in my garden in the section below.

Toad lilies generally grow one to three feet tall with an upright habit. Most species are clump forming but a few—including Formosa toad lily—spread by rhizomes and will form colonies over time. Some will also self-seed, but they are not invasive. The leaves grow alternately on arching stems, and clusters of flowers form between the leaf nodes or at the stem tips. The delicately elaborate small flowers, composed of six petal-like structures that botanists call tepals, come in a range of colors from white all the way through to deep purple. Many are elaborately embellished with spots and stripes. Some start blooming in midsummer but the majority flower in late summer to fall.

I live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and several years ago our growing zone was upgraded from 4a to 4b thanks to the “heat island” the downtown area creates, along with our warming climate. I started planting a variety of toad lilies in a site that was mostly in shade, and initially they seemed to be doing well. Things changed when a storm took down a bunch of trees and the shaded areas suddenly became mostly full sun. I lost a lot of plants, including many toad lilies. The lone survivor over these last several years was the selection “Tojen”, which had been in an area that was partly shaded but has evolved into almost full shade.

## RECOMMENDED SPECIES AND SELECTIONS

**Common Toad Lily** (*T. hirta*, USDA Hardiness Zones 4–8) Native to Japan, common toad lily has white flowers decorated with reddish spots that start opening in early fall. It grows two to



Above: A hybrid between two toad lily species, ‘Tojen’ proved to be one of the most adaptable species in the author’s garden. Opposite page: This closeup of the cultivar ‘Sinonome’ reveals the elaborate, jewellike floral structure.

three feet tall. Many cultivars of this species have been introduced and here are a few I have grown:

**'Blue Wonder'** (Zones 5–8) only lasted a year in my garden, but it has beautiful white flowers with bluish-purple spots that contrast nicely with the dark green foliage. It's recommended for part to full shade, but in USDA Zone 4, full shade would help it to be more successful.

**'Variegata'** (Zones 4–8) is an upright spreading selection with white-edged green leaves and white flowers that have irregular purple spots throughout. If you live in a cool-climate region, like me, cut the stems back to the ground at the end of the growing season and mulch around the crown.

**'White Towers'** (Zones 4–8) has pure white flowers with yellow spots at the base of each of its six tepals. It's an early fall bloomer known for having a more lax habit than some other selections.

### ***Tricyrtis formosana* and Cultivars**

Formosa toad lily (Zones 4–9) is native to Taiwan and nearby coastal China. It is sometimes listed as *T. stolonifera*, which gives you a clue to its ability to form colonies in the right moist, shady location. The pinkish-white flowers on this fall bloomer are embellished with red and yellow spots. If the colony gets too large, dig up clumps in spring and share them with friends and neighbors. In a trial of toad lilies at the Chicago Botanic Garden in the late 1990s, this species was one of two that received the top rating. Here are a few of its cultivars worth considering:

**'Autumn Glow'** (Zones 6–9) has variegated yellow-and-green leaves and purple- to violet-speckled flowers in fall.

**'Emperor'** (Zones 6–9) features large bright yellow leaves lined in white and white flowers heavily speckled with purple spots in fall.

**'Gilt Edge'** (Zones 4/5–9) has dark green leaves edged in yellow with light-pink flowers that have petals sprinkled with dark pink spots.

**'Samurai'** (Zones 6–9) is another variety that will “glow” in the shaded garden habitat with its green-centered, yellow-edged leaves and white-bluish colored flowers covered in purple spots throughout.



Top: 'Gilt Edge', a compact cultivar of Formosa toad lily, lights up shade gardens with its variegated foliage and cheerful pink flowers. Above: A bumblebee visits 'Autumn Glow', another Formosa toad lily cultivar. Opposite page: 'Alba', a nearly pure white flowered selection of common toad lily, has lovely pleated foliage.





'Taipei Silk', a hybrid selection, forms a lovely groundcover on this gentle slope in dappled shade.

### Hybrids Between *T. hirta* and *T. formosana*

'Miyazaki' (Zones 4–8) is another late fall-blooming variety that has white or pink blossoms with a scattering of bluish-purple dots throughout. It received the top rating in a trial at the Chicago Botanic Garden (see "Resources," page 31). A related selection with gilt-edged foliage is 'Miyazaki Gold'.

'Sinonome' (Zones 5–7) is another shade-loving selection that has white petals with reddish-purple spots.

'Tojen' (Zones 4–7) is probably my favorite because it has reliably come back year after year in my garden. Being a fall bloomer, however, the flowers are sometimes nipped by first frosts in our region. The flowers are a bit different in that they're devoid of any spots, starting with a yellow throat and flower petals going from white to lavender edges. Its leaves are said to be some of the largest among the genus.

### Miscellaneous Hybrids

'Imperial Banner' (Zones 6–8/9) is one of the most striking selections that I've run across, but unfortunately, it's not hardy enough to survive here in Minneapolis. Its large green leaves are covered with a random white variegation, making a great background for the lavender colored, purple speckled flowers.

'Lightning Strike' (Zones 4/5–8) is known for its bright green foliage with streaks of yellowish-gold, that some consider variegated. Its white flowers are covered with tiny lavender spots.

'Taipei Silk' (Zones 6–8) has beautiful white flowers that are edged in shades of lavender with spots of reddish-purple sprinkled throughout. It blooms from midsummer to early fall.

### LESSER KNOWN SPECIES

*Tricyrtis lasiocarpa* (Zones 7–10) goes by the common name amethyst toad

lily for its striking lilac to purple flowers that bloom in fall. Native to Taiwan, it has attractive speckled foliage.

*Tricyrtis latifolia* (Zones 4–7) is native to Japan and China. Its striking bright yellow flowers with brown spots bloom in terminal clusters in mid- to late summer. A selection called 'Golden Leopard' is sometimes offered.

*Tricyrtis ohsumiensis* (4/5–7) is known as dwarf yellow toad lily for its compact habit, which tops out at about a foot. This Japanese native is distinguished by glossy foliage and large bright yellow, fall-blooming flowers. It seems best suited to cooler climates.

*Tricyrtis puberula* (Zones 5–7), a Chinese native sometimes listed as downy toad lily, has yellow flowers covered with reddish-brown speckles starting in midsummer. The glossy light green leaves, decorated with dark spots, remind me of the foliage of trout



'Imperial Banner', left, displays variegated foliage. Low-growing *T. ohsumiensis*, right, has pale yellow blossoms.

lilies (*Erythronium* spp.), an early forest bloomer here in the United States.

### CARE AND MAINTENANCE

As I've learned, the ideal habitat for toad lilies is full to part shade with moist, well-drained, neutral to slightly acidic soils. Ed Lyon, director of Reiman Gardens at Iowa State University in Ames, recommends mulching around toad lilies with shredded leaves at the end of the fall, "because I think they

benefit from that when we have periods with no snow cover in winter. Their boon is their bane, because they provide late season flowering when other plants have quit blooming but that also makes them susceptible to frost."

When I add new plants to the garden, I always consider the two P's: pests and pollinators. In my garden, I've filmed honey bees and bumblebees attempting to gather nectar from toad lily flowers. The honey bees can crawl down the te-

pals to get to the nectar, while the larger bumblebees have to push their way in, picking up pollen grains as they brush against the stamens. On occasion, I've seen bumblebees attempt to "steal" nectar by slicing into the base of the flower.

As for pests, I've never had any problems with critters on toad lilies. Gardeners in other regions report rabbits and deer will snack on toad lilies, however, as well as issues with snails and slugs.

### FABULOUS AND FUN

As an enthusiastic gardener and a long-time garden and nature photographer, I have come to enjoy the toad lilies I've grown in my garden over the years and done a fair bit of research on them along the way. I highly recommend giving toad lilies a chance in your own home garden. Plant them where you can enjoy the small, jewellike flowers up close. And, yes, feel free to laugh as you're telling garden visitors their common name. ■

*An award-winning photographer and writer, Bill Johnson lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with his wife, Rachel Dabill.*

### Sources

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- Plant Delights Nursery**, Raleigh, NC. [www.plantdelights.com](http://www.plantdelights.com).

### Resources

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