

Ask a Master Gardener

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Annette's Glorious Gloriosas

I heard through the grapevine that my cousin, Annette Tyson, had a most unusual flower that she has been growing outside since 1991. If her Gloriosa Lilies had read the description of their chances of survival in zone 7b, they would have packed up and headed south long ago. It was a good excuse to visit this wise gardener so I went out to her beautiful garden to see the mystery plant.

She told a story about the time when she and her sister were in Florida at a wedding and were bedazzled by the gorgeous, exotic flowers used in the floral arrangements. She discovered that the flowers were Gloriosa lilies. They are also known as Gloriosa Flame Lily, Fire Lily, Climbing Lily, Glory Lily, Superb Lily and Creeping lily. She was delighted when her sister gave her some tubers so that she could grow her own, which was a risky business since these warm climate beauties are considered to be hardy only in zones 8b to 11. It is recommended that tubers should be lifted and stored inside in colder zones or they can be container grown and the containers brought in during the winter.

Gloriosas are grown as half hardy annuals by gardeners. Nevertheless, Annette planted them outside permanently and has always covered them in winter with mulch, rugs and other protection. They still faithfully come up every year and defy the low temperatures that we have in zone 7b.

The Gloriosa Lily is a tropical climbing vine (reaching about 6' - 8' in height). It produces dramatic red flowers with a yellow center that bloom continuously from summer into fall. Vines reach 6' or more by attaching tenderly to structures or other larger plants.

Gloriosas take around 2-3 years to bloom when grown from seed. These take a good while to germinate, 30-45 days, and they must be kept warm during this time. When growing them from tubers, they should be planted about 2 inches deep when temperatures stay above 50°F. It is said that the tubers are toxic so handling them with gloves might be a good idea.

The gloriosa lily is at its most dramatic when it seems to bloom out of some other plant. The vine is weak and sparse standing alone, so it is best combined with something else that is strong enough to support it or trained up a trellis. A gardener friend in Carrollton told me about a Gloriosa that grows up a large tree in a wooded area of his neighborhood. It is a popular plant for providing color in greenhouses and conservatories. It needs bright light and a humid atmosphere if grown indoors. When planted outside, they should be located in a sunny place in humus rich soil.

So....Why are these beautiful, near tropical plants surviving in a climate zone where they shouldn't survive? This needs a little 'splaining. Even though tender and half-hardy perennials are less likely to survive the winter than hardy perennials, they are distinct from annual plants

that can last only for a maximum of one season. All perennial plants have some kind of storage capability designed to enable the plant to survive through the winter. Plants that have a tuber, tuberous root or corm for winter storage are classified as perennials even if they are not hardy enough to survive winters reliably. Many of the plants sold in northern areas as "annuals" are actually tender or half-hardy perennials.

Typically, half-hardy perennials can tolerate slightly colder temperatures than tender perennials. A tender perennial is unlikely to survive any frost; a half-hardy perennial may be able to survive the same frost that killed the tender perennial. There are no absolute temperature values to discuss when assessing the cold tolerance of perennials. Some tender perennials can survive frost if they have a strong underground plant structure. Whether or not any perennial survives the winter depends partly on the vigor of the individual plant, the depth of any snow cover and the presence or absence of a micro-climate such as the side of a greenhouse. Annette's Gloriosas are still going after all these years because of the love and care she has given them to help them survive our cold winters. After all, they are a lovely reminder of her sweet sister.

For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.