
The Secret TO Great Calla Lilies

by Frederick B. Essig

One of the plants that I saw in great abundance when I attended an international botanical meeting in South Africa in 1998 was the white calla lily, *Zantedeschia aethiopica*. Popular both as a garden flower and in flower arrangements, this long-lasting blossom invokes an image of peace and tranquility.

Technically, the calla lily is not really a flower. Like other members of the Aroid family, the true flowers are very tiny and crowded onto the central spike, or spadix. The white structure surrounding the bright orange spadix is a modified leaf called a spathe. And while we're being technical, the calla is not really a lily either. True lilies, such as the Easter lily or tiger lily, have large true flowers, each with 6 large tepals (petals and sepals that are similar in appearance), that are produced on long, leafy stalks.

In the fabulous Cape Province of South Africa, the white calla is a native plant found in dense colonies in all kinds of wet areas, even roadside ditches. Where we would find cattails or pickerel weed in Florida, South Africans would find calla lilies. It apparently has escaped from cultivation elsewhere in the world, including Australia, New Zealand, southern Europe, and South America. But, surprisingly, it doesn't seem to grow that easily here, which may be good because the last thing Florida needs is another aquatic weed.

What is the difficulty with calla lilies? I have seen them growing nicely only in a few spots in Tampa where the soil is rich and moist, but my own attempts have met with mediocre results. Obviously, since they dwell in marshy places in Africa, providing them with abundant water is an important key to their success. But the other key is sunlight - full sunlight. Only in full sun do you get vigorous, compact foliage and sturdy, deeply colored blossoms.

It is, however, difficult in the typical Florida landscape or flower bed to provide full sunlight and amply moist soil at the same time. Our sandy soil dries out quickly under the blistering heat of the sun. The solution to this dilemma is obvious - grow them in pots set into containers of standing water out in the sun.

I should mention also that I grow them during the winter and spring, the way they grow naturally in South Africa. Growing them at the right time of year is another key to their success.

My results with this approach have so far been spectacular. The original rhizome outgrew its 8 inch pot the first season, but produced only one weak blossom among the abundant foliage. The second season, however,

produced a couple of nice sturdy blossoms from one pot. As the white calla is a fairly large plant, to get a nice display with multiple blossoms you'll need a larger container, perhaps a small pool, to provide the necessary space.

Following my success with the white calla, I went to a local garden shop and picked up packaged rhizomes of both the yellow and pink callas. These are always available in Florida, but my earlier attempts at growing them didn't meet with much success. I planted them this time as I had the white callas - in pots set into tubs full of water and out in the full sun. I grew them in the spring and early summer, having



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The elegant bloom of the white calla.

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This pink calla sent up 6 sturdy blossoms the second year.

learned that they come from further east in South Africa where the rains fall primarily in the summer.

As with the white calla, I had lush vegetative growth the first season, but no flowers. Late in the season the plants were obviously no longer growing and the foliage became sickly, so I forced them into dormancy by allowing the rhizomes to dry out.

When they started up the next spring, I again had lush foliage, but this time a spectacular show of blossoms as well. The yellow calla had 3 sturdy, brilliantly colored blossoms, and the pink calla had half a dozen. I have frequently seen potted callas for sale in nurseries and florist shops, but never with such bright colors as these sun-grown specimens.

The yellow calla, *Zantedeschia elliottiana*, not only has brilliantly colored

flowers, but also interesting, arrowhead-shaped leaves speckled with numerous white dots. The pink calla, *Zantedeschia rehmannii*, has leaves that are elongate, somewhat broadened in the middle, but tapered at the base - quite different from those of the other species.

Many hybrids have been made between these 2 species resulting in varied shades of orange and apricot, but I prefer the brilliant colors of the true species. There are actually 8 recognized species of *Zantedeschia*, most of which are rarely, if ever, seen in cultivation. *Z. albomaculata*,

apparently with a patch of purple in the throat of its white spathe, is available in the commercial trade from time to time, but I haven't had a chance to try it yet. Now that we know how to grow the first 3

here in Florida, it would be great to try the other 5.

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A trio of brilliant blossoms of the yellow calla.