

Hybrid lily's beauty is twice as nice

By Bill Hlubik/For the Star-Ledger

If you're looking for a unique gift for the holidays, there's a new lily that keeps on giving -- with beautiful blooms.

Richard Merritt, professor of the school of environmental and biological sciences at Rutgers University, began work on this hybrid series at the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station in 1996.

Since then, he has worked with colleagues Nick Vorsa and Tom Gianfagna, "using conventional breeding with crosses between *L. longiflorum* and asiatics, orientals and trumpet lilies," Merritt says.

Four years ago, they noticed something special about these cultivars. "These new lines produced magnificent flowers from small to moderate size bulbs, the stems were extra thick and did not require staking, and the bulbs were tolerant of our cold winter temperatures," Merritt says.

"They can be grown in pots indoors for the holidays, producing one or more flowers per bulb that each last nine days or more," he says.

Plants will stay healthy in pots and can be moved to the outdoor flower garden in March or April. You can expect another flush of blooms in June of the same year.

Plants grown from these bulbs produced a high degree of hybrid vigor and were extremely prolific.

The first two cultivars being offered are 'Ramapo Red Passion,' which grows 12 inches to 14 inches tall, and 'Ramapo Wine Passion,' which grows 22 inches tall. The first exhibits a brilliant scarlet red flower and the second produces a unique palette of maroon to purplish hues.

Use and care: These dwarf cultivars can be used to provide a splash of color to border plantings. They can be planted alone or in masses to make a bold statement.

Water indoor plants once the soil is dry, but avoid overwatering. These lily cultivars are drought tolerant, but avoid withholding water during flowering to prevent early flower drop. Place potted houseplants near a window that provides maximum light. In many cases, this may be a window with unshaded southern or eastern exposure.

Plant outdoors in March or April in well-drained soil and water as needed.

For garden and bedding plants, place in areas with full to moderate sunlight. Plants perform best in well-drained, fertile soils that are slightly acidic, but can tolerate a wide range of conditions.

The dwarf Ramapo cultivars do not require staking and are quite hardy. Plants can be mulched with 2 inches of compost or other organic materials for extra winter protection. Very light applications of fertilizer are all the plants require. Add well-rotted compost to garden soils or use very minimal applications of dried manure.



'Ramapo Red Passion' lily

"To my knowledge, no other lily blooms multiple times in one season," Merritt says.

There are at least two dozen more cultivars in the pipeline for future release. One will grow as a low groundcover and produce abundant white flowers.

Learn more: Visit njaes.rutgers.edu or ifplantscouldtalk.rutgers.edu for gardening information and fact sheets. You can go to njaes.rutgers.edu/county/ for a listing of local County Cooperative Extension garden help-line contacts.

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Send your garden inquiries to Plant Talk, The Star-Ledger, 1 Star Ledger Plaza, Newark, N.J. 07102-1200 or planttalk@starledger.com.

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