

Turk's Cap Lily

Dick Fisher

Lilium superbum

Family: Liliaceae

Turk's Cap Lily, *Lilium superbum*, is one of most striking Rhode Island native plants, with bright red-orange blossoms atop a six- to eight-foot single stalk. The blossoms are speckled with purple dots and have a distinctive green star in the center. The name is derived from the inverted petals and sepals, three each, which nearly touch in the rear of the flower thrusting the stigma and anthers forward. *L. superbum* was the subject of Cultivation Note #9 written by Betsy Keiffer in 1991. This Note incorporates much of her original material and expands it somewhat.



Fig. 1. Mature plant in full bloom—late summer

There are four members of the lily genus growing naturally in Rhode Island, of which three are native and one, *L. lancifolium*, is an introduced species. The flowers of these four are sufficiently similar to possibly cause confusion in identification if encountered in isolation and without examining distinguishing features. *L. lancifolium*, the common Tiger Lily, is distinguished by the simple lanceolate leaves with black bulblets attached in the axilla, where the leaf meets the stem. The three native species have leaves in a distinctive whorled pattern occurring at intervals around a substantial stem creating what Culina refers to as ‘a chain of umbrellas’ up the stem, [Fig 1]. *L. philadelphicum*, Wood Lily, has a similar flower but it faces upward instead of nodding like the other three. It grows in dryer locations than the others. The flower of *L. canadense*, Canada Lily, although nodding, is usually yellow.



Fig. 2. Individual blossom

L. superbum has a native range from New Hampshire to Georgia and, although it prefers moist, acid soils, it will grow in most garden settings in full to part sun. The central stem can become quite stout and up to eight feet high supporting multiple blossoms. The red-orange blossoms attach to the stem with long peduncles so that the tops of mature plants may resemble a chandelier [Fig. 1]. The blossoms follow the three-fold symmetry pattern typical of the lily family. The three petals and three sepals are identical. The six stamens contain brown anthers surrounding one pistil with a three-part fused stigma [Fig. 2]. The seed pods develop in early fall and may stay on the plant into the winter. The pods also have a three-fold symmetry with six chambers containing hundreds of flat, stacked seeds. When the pods have formed, if you look down the stem longitudinally you will see a whorled pattern as the peduncles attach to the main stem. The peduncles attach at sixty-degree angles to each other, so six make a full circle.

Propagation

Propagation of Turk's Cap Lilies can be a long, slow process, so be prepared. It can be accomplished using either seed or root scales. The seeds are abundantly produced and can be harvested in the fall when the pods

are dry and papery as mentioned above. They have a complex dormancy requiring a warm period followed by a cold period before a second warm germination phase. If planted outside in the spring, germination will take about twelve months. To speed the process, begin a three-month warm stratification period by placing the seeds in moist peat moss in a plastic bag and keeping them inside at a normal household temperature in the late fall and winter. The seeds should develop tiny bulblets. Then begin a cold stratification period by placing the same bags in the refrigerator for another three or so months. The bulblets can be planted directly from the refrigerator into seed trays or in the ground in early spring. The first summer a single leaf will be the only sign of life and may not last through the summer, but keep the trays watered and winter them outside perhaps covered with some mulch. The second summer the plant should develop a stem and a few leaves. These can be planted out with a bloom expected in one or more years. This sounds like a long time, but it takes more time than care, and the results are spectacular. The germination rate seems to be very low, so plant abundant seed to avoid sparse seed beds.

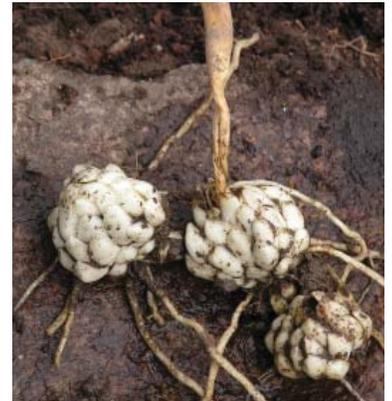


Fig. 3. *L. superbum* bulb showing main bulb with rhizomes connecting two new developing bulbs.

The second and faster method uses scales from the bulbs of mature plants. This can be done from your own or a neighbor's plants with permission, but do not use this method with wild plants or on public lands. In the fall after the seeds have set, dig down carefully following the stalk to the white scaly bulbs [Fig. 3]. Individual scales easily peel off from the outside of the main or subsidiary bulbs. Save them and replant the main bulb. The scales can then be planted immediately in outside beds or pots. They may take several years to bloom, but this method is faster than seed propagation.

Availability

Turk's Cap seeds are available, but check to be certain the species name, *superbum*, is attached to them, as Turk's Cap can refer to a number of lily species with inverted tepals. Mail order companies also advertise the plants, but verify that they are cultivated and not dug in the wild. Plants will be available at the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society sale in June 2014. (Editor's note: maybe!)

References:

- Cullina, W. *Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada*. Houghton Mifflin. Boston/New York. 2000.
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Kaczmarek, F. *New England Wildflowers*. FalconGuides. Guilford, CT. 2009.
Elpel, T. *Botany in a Day: The Patterns Method of Plant Identification*. 5th Ed. HOPS Press. Pony, MT. 2006.
Keiffer, B. Cultivation Notes #9: "Turk's Cap Lily." *The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society Bulletin*. 1991.

RIWPS Policy

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: "Cultivation Note" is a regular feature in WildfloraRI, the Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at Richard.Fisher2@cox.net. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — WildfloraRI Editorial Committee.

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