Carolyn Curtis fell in love with *Lilium canadense*, the Canada lily, decades ago, when a woman giving a talk about flower arranging to the South County Garden Club brought buckets of the cut lilies from Nantucket.

“I was so excited I asked the woman, ‘What is this?’” said Carolyn, a longtime RIWPS member and propagator for the society’s plant sales. “The woman said, ‘I don’t know, I just picked them off the side of the road.’”

*Lilium canadense*, which is native to Rhode Island, flourishes in wet meadows and sunny to lightly shaded ditches along roadsides. It can be found from Quebec across to Indiana, down to Kentucky and western Virginia. The books say it grows to five feet, but it reaches about seven feet in Carolyn’s garden. Whorls of three or more long, lance-shaped leaves space themselves elegantly up the vigorous stems. Six reflexed tepals form the Canada lily’s trumpet-like flowers, which vary in color from pale yellow to near red, each speckled on the inside with reddish-brown dots. This lily is mainly pollinated by the ruby-throated hummingbird.

I first saw this magnificent lily in mid-July three summers ago in Carolyn’s Narragansett garden, when I joined a group from Seed Starters East to learn some propagation secrets from the master. We gaped up at the candelabras of flared golden flowers dangling over our heads from multiple stalks near the top of the seven-foot stems.

This was about 25 years after Carolyn’s first moment of love with this lily—“I was possessed!” she recalls. After the lecture, she asked for a stalk and drove straight to Irene Stuckey’s house in Kingston. “She wasn’t home, so I just laid it on her doorstep.”

(Dr. Stuckey, a plant physiologist, taught for years at the University of Rhode Island and wrote several books dear to native plant lovers’ hearts, including *Rhode Island Wildflowers, Endangered Plants of Rhode Island*, and more recently, with RIWPS founder and first president, Lisa L. Gould, *Coastal Plants from Cape Cod to Cape Canaveral*.)

When Carolyn called Dr. Stuckey a few hours later, the botanist said, “I wondered who left that *Lilium canadense* here.”

Carolyn recalled, “So there, I had my answer! I kept thinking, ‘We gotta have this!’ but for a long time I couldn’t find seeds.”

She finally found them through Prairie Moon Nursery, a mail order company in Minnesota, and read up on how to grow this species.

The seeds require a warm period followed by a cold one before planting, then several years of watching little leaves grow. Obviously, this flower is not for impatient types. “I was gardening in Matunuck at the time,” said Carolyn, who moved to Narragansett with her husband, Richard, 16 years ago. “But they did bloom there, five years from seed.” (The books say five to seven years.) She later discovered that planting the scales of the lily bulb, preferably in the spring, shaves two years off that time.

One morning early last October, Carolyn led the way to her propagation beds on the edge of a woodland and showed me how easy it is to plant the scales. She dug up a lily bulb—actually two bulbs, the current season’s, which produced the stem, and which was attached to another that had grown over the summer—both covered with kernel-like scales

“When I collect the bulbs in the spring for the sale, some of the scales come off the bulbs,” said Carolyn. “So I just put them back in the ground.”

She carefully pried off a few, no bigger than the tip of my pinky, handed me a couple to plant in my own garden, and then stuck the others an inch...
and a half down in the soft, rich soil of her raised bed. She replanted the hefty bulb about five inches down and then led the way to a stone retaining wall near the house where the lilies bloomed this summer. The heat from the wall and afternoon sun apparently suited them. “They like to have their feet shaded, so it’s good to have ferns or something at their base,” Carolyn said.

Though she had already collected most of the seed pods a few weeks earlier to keep the seeds from being eaten by various critters, a few dried pods still perched on the brown stems.

“The pods were light brown when I began collecting, and some had been pecked by birds,” said Carolyn.

**Cultivation**

“I open the pods and place the seeds on a paper towel on my dining room table,” said Carolyn. “I put them in moistened sphagnum in a sealed plastic bag as soon as possible—usually within a week at the longest.” She uses Canadian milled sphagnum moss moistened with distilled water and keeps the bag in a bowl at room temperature out of direct light for three months. Using distilled water can reduce any problems with fungus or mold.

During this warm period, the seed swells and sometimes forms a little root. Carolyn then places the bag in a refrigerator for three months and checks it every two weeks to make sure the medium hasn’t dried out. After three months, she plants the seeds about a quarter-inch deep in a flat filled with a good compost mix and places it outside in a lightly shaded, protected area and keeps it moist. The first leaves will appear within a year, if all goes well. Once the leaves are an inch or so tall, Carolyn transplants them to her deeper propagation beds. When the bulbs are about the size of a small acorn, Carolyn transplants them to her garden beds. If you are lucky, those beauties will bloom for you in five years, maybe seven.

When you talk to someone who loves something, you sometimes forget to ask the obvious: Why do you love *Lilium canadense* so much? “Because they are native, majestic, tall, and elegant,” Carolyn says. “For me, they stand out and say, ‘Look at me, I’m special.’ Apparently, they make good cut flowers—at least the flower arranger thought so—but I’ve never cut them, because I want the seeds.”

**References**


https://gobotany.newenglandwild.org/species/lilium/canadense

**Rhode Island Wild Plant Society**

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