

Q&As on Unusual Flowers and Plant of the Week

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Heidi Sheesley

Giant Blue Walking Iris 'Regina' is an exciting, wide-leaved walking iris with distinctive 3 to 4 inch wide, violet-blue flowers that appear in early summer above strikingly brilliant jade-colored and sword-shaped foliage. 'Regina' creates a beautiful vertical accent in the landscape, forming clumps that average 4 feet in height and will be available at the Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale on October 11.



PHOTO BY Cliff & Alex Johnson

Sweet potato flowers are seldom seen in American gardens. Sweet potatoes are related to morning glories and both plants produce trumpet-shaped flowers.



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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.

Q: I have grown sweet potatoes for many years. They are easy to grow and I harvest about two dozen tubers during fall. This is the first year I have seen sweet potato vines produce flowers. Is flowering a rare occurrence in sweet potatoes?

A: I've been a horticulturist with the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office for 25 years and this is the first year that a gardener has reported that their sweet potatoes produced flowers. I actually got two reports this fall — the other being my older brother who resides in Raleigh, North Carolina, and

has a vegetable garden.

My brother was surprised as well by his sweet potato vines producing flowers. He and I reminisced about growing and harvesting a sizable acreage of sweet potatoes on an annual basis when we growing up on the family farm in south central Virginia.

Neither of us recalls ever seeing sweet potatoes produce flowers. He was impressed that I could describe the flower. I was able to visualize the flower because I knew that sweet potatoes are first cousins

to morning glories and both plants belong to a family of plants known as Convolvulaceae.

If you know what a morning glory flower looks like, you already have a good idea of what a sweet potato flower looks like. Morning glory flowers occur in a wide range of colors (including red, white, blue, pink, purple and bicolors). The trumpet-shaped flowers of sweet potato flowers typically are bi-colored with the upper portion (known as the limb) being white and the lower portion (known as the throat)





typically ranging from pale lavender to deep lavender in color.

Sweet potato flowers are few and far between. The plant produces flowers in response to days becoming shorter as the fall season approaches. Sweet potatoes commonly produce flowers when grown in tropical climates where they originated.

You need to get up early to see sweet potato flowers at their best. They open right after daybreak, and have usually faded by noon (as is often the case for morning glories). They only stay open for one morning.

Q: My elephant ears have performed wonderfully this year as a result of the rainfall over the summer. I just noticed one of my plants produced a large-sized white flower. Is this common?

A: As the day length shortens with the arrival of fall, elephant ears switch their energy resources from producing leaves to the production of flowers and corms. The production of leaves will become slower and the corm will swell noticeably.

Elephant ears provide a tropical accent to landscapes but they are not known for their flowers (which are actually called inflorescences) because they are hidden underneath the leaf canopy. However, the inflorescences can be quite large and attractive and are frequently fragrant—although only for a short time when the flower opens.

Flowers may measure up to 10 inches tall and 3 inches wide. Flower color is usually white or yellow-white. Elephant ears belong to a family of plants known as Araceae (sometimes called the philodendron family).

Philodendrons, caladiums, dieffenbachias, peace lilies as well as elephant ears are classified in the Araceae family and, not surprisingly, all of the members of that family produce distinctive Jack-in-the-pulpit like flowers.

Plant of the Week

A Plant of the Week will be featured weekly over the next 4 weeks. Plants featured have a proven record of performing well in the Galveston County growing area and will be available at the 2014 Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale to be held on Saturday, October 11, at Carbide Park in La Marque.

This week's featured plant is the Giant Blue Walking Iris (*Neomarica caerulea* 'Regina'). This exciting, wide-leafed walking iris has lovely 3 to 4 inch wide, violet-blue flowers that appear in early summer above strikingly brilliant jade-colored and sword-shaped foliage. Giant Blue Walking Iris creates a beautiful vertical accent, forming clumps that average 4 feet in height. It's a repeat bloomer, producing flushes of flowers in succession. This iris prefers light shade and needs well-drained soil. It tolerates temperatures as low as 20 degrees and is stunning when grown as a container plant!

Giant Blue Walking Iris is also

known as Apostle's Plant for the belief it won't bloom until there are 12 leaves (known botanically as fans). Some of my gardening buddies report that their plants produced 14 to 15 leaves before blooming but all agree that the blooms are well-worth the wait.

Giant Blue Walking Iris has not been readily available commercially as are many of the other perennial plants that will be offered for sale at the upcoming Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale. Be sure to make a notation on your gardening calendar of activities to attend the Fall Plant Sale on Saturday, October 11. Check our website (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>) for updates and map directions.

Add one or more Giant Blue Walking Iris to your home landscape and count the returns year after year as new plants form on the flower stems.

