

# Long Live the Lilies

*Crinum*s are all Southern beauty and all Texas toughness

Greg Grant

**C**rinum lilies and I go way back; they were among the first flowers I knew as a child. My grandmother grew them along her front porch in Deep East Texas, where the audacious flowers bathed us with their powerful fragrance during summer evenings. She grew two passalong clones — the dark pink ‘Ellen Bosanquet’ and one of the numerous striped milk and wine lilies (*Crinum x herbertii*), a gift from my grandfather’s aunt.

Often referred to simply as “lilies” in the South, our garden crinums are mostly hybrid descendants from a handful of species native to Africa. They are actually in the amaryllis family, not the lily family, though the genus *Crinum* comes

from the Greek word for “lily.” Crinums are one of our quintessential Southern garden plants for several reasons. First, being somewhat subtropical bulbs limits their cultivation to the mid- and lower South. Therefore they won’t be seen in Northern gardens, books, magazines, and TV shows. Second, they were introduced to the South by the early settlers, giving them time to be ingrained into our gardening culture. And most importantly, as my friend and mentor Dr. William C. Welch puts it, “No crinum has ever died.” This longevity has made them perfect low-maintenance dooryard plants in Southern cottage gardens and ideal lily substitutes in family graveyards.

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HERE: Among Greg Grant's treasures is *Crinum x 'Ellen Bosanquet'*, a passalong plant handed from a great-great aunt to his grandmother. It blooms along his porch in June.

OPPOSITE: *Crinum x 'Carroll Abbott'* shows off its lush, striped pendant flowers atop tall stems.



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LEFT: Among the solid-colored crinums is dark pink 'Ellen Bosanquet'. Another solid is the white crinum 'Album'.

OPPOSITE: Rosie, the writer's best dog ever, in a garden filled with crinums in bloom.

Crinums are to the South what peonies are to the North: cherished, bold passalong perennials that provide wonderful cut flowers for both church and home. Peonies belong to the North; they struggle with the heat, drought, and humidity in the South, conditions crinums thrive under. Although crinums are considered typically "Southern," I think of them as pure Texan. After all, they are tough as a boot and so bold they border on being obnoxious. Sound familiar?

In the spirit of horticultural disclosure, I have to tell you that there are "garden snobs" out there who don't like crinums because of their coarse, rank foliage. Cannas suffer the same stigma. But crinums, like Texans, are supposed to be coarse-textured, and to not like them because of it would be akin to not liking longhorns because they have long horns or pecans because they have shells. As Popeye used to say, "I yam what I yam," and I see no reason for crinums to apologize for simply being what they are.

After all, these are long-lived perennials that never need dividing, fertilizing, spraying, or even watering to live. Many of them come from parts of the globe that are a desert for part of the year and a lake for another part of the year. If that doesn't mimic our Texas gardening conditions, nothing does. They are very much like their rain lily cousins in their habit of blooming after soaking rains.

And what blooms they are! Crinums generally bloom on stalks around 3 feet tall with clusters of amaryllis-like blooms in white, pink, or pink and white striped. Dr. Welch has always preferred the soft pastel colors, while I've always been fond of the loud-striped milk and wine lilies. He says they are "gaudy," but where I come from, that's a compliment.

Of course, the vases used for these tall, heavy flowers must be sturdy and heavy themselves. I often display them in antique watering cans. As each individual bloom fades in the cluster, it can be snapped off and discarded while the rest of the unopened buds continue to expand. Most crinums have very fragrant flowers, especially in the evening, when they are often pollinated by perfume-seeking moths. They make superb economical-but-stunning cut flowers for summer weddings, family reunions, horticultural seminars, and cemetery homecomings.

While most commonly used as specimen plants in the landscape or in mixed perennial borders, crinums also make outstanding summer perennials in bold sweeps and masses. For best performance, provide them with full sun or very light shade. And though

they are constructed to survive long droughts with their huge underground bulbs, they make nicer foliage and more blooms with regular rainfall or irrigation, something I admit to seldom providing. They are also among the very few bulbs that can have their foliage removed occasionally if it's marred by drought or thrips damage. Healthy new foliage will spring forth with the next rain or irrigation event. This foliage removal is a definite "no-no" with traditional spring and fall bulbs (*Narcissus*, *Lycoris*, etc.), though, as each year's foliage produces next year's blooms.

There are actually hundreds of crinum cultivars. Unfortunately, due to their bulb size and lack of cold hardiness in Europe and the North, they are not common in

**Mail order crinum sources:**


- Brent and Becky's Bulbs ([brentandbeckysbulbs.com](http://brentandbeckysbulbs.com))
- Jenks Farmer ([jenksfarmer.com](http://jenksfarmer.com))
- Marcelle's Crinums ([marcellescrinums.com](http://marcellescrinums.com))
- Old House Gardens ([oldhousegardens.com](http://oldhousegardens.com))
- Plant Delights Nursery ([plantdelights.com](http://plantdelights.com))
- Southern Bulb Company ([southernbulbs.com](http://southernbulbs.com))

**For more information on crinums, see:**

- Bulbs for Warm Climates* by Thad M. Howard (2001, University of Texas Press)
- Garden Bulbs for the South* - 2nd Edition, by Scott Ogden (2007, Timber Press)





the nursery trade. Some of the most common crinum lilies Texas gardeners will encounter are *Crinum x digweedii* (pale pink and white striped, in fall), *Crinum x gowenii* (pale pink and white striped, in summer), *Crinum x herbertii* (pink and white striped, in summer), *Crinum x powellii* 'Album' (white, in summer) and 'Ellen Bosanquet' (dark pink, in June). Unfortunately, two of the most common crinums in Texas gardens are among the least showy. These are *Crinum bulbispermum*, which has gray-green foliage and smallish white or faintly striped flowers in early spring and summer with a hint of bleach in its fragrance. It sets seeds and has naturalized in bar ditches in Central Texas. Don't be too hard on it, however, as it's the most cold hardy of all crinums and the parent of most of our successful garden crinums. The other is the light pink 'J.C. Harvey', which multiplies prolifically but rarely blooms in mid-summer. This unfortunately makes it our most common passalong crinum. I once picked up a clump off the roadside in San Antonio. Just remember, you get what you pay for! Check out the mail order sources on the facing page for a staggering array of both heirloom and cutting-edge new crinum hybrids. 

*About the author:* Greg Grant is a horticulturist at Stephen F. Austin Gardens in Nacogdoches, author of *Texas Fruit and Vegetable Gardens* (Cool Springs Press) and *In Greg's Garden* (Kindle), and co-author of *Heirloom Gardening in the South* (Texas A&M Press).