

NATIONAL PLANT COLLECTION®

Aspidistra elatior & *A. sichuanensis*

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INTRODUCTION

Aspidistra, commonly known as the 'cast iron plant', is well known for being an indestructive houseplant. The genus originates from all over Asia and grows in shady and damp woodlands.

Although the origins of *A. elatior* lie in China, it was the only species which was introduced in Japan. The Japanese made an abundance of selections, only a few of which are still in existence today. Because of the way the Japanese worked with this *Aspidistra*, it is often regarded as originating from Japan. *Aspidistra elatior* was introduced by the Dutch (who had exclusive trade rights with Japan) into Europe in the early 1800s and arrived in the United Kingdom in 1822.

The Victorians adored this plant for its toughness, earning it its name 'cast iron plant', and for its ability to cope with the fumes and soot of the gas lighting and heating, which made other plants turn yellow and die within two weeks. The damp and dark Victorian houses were a perfect habitat for the *Aspidistra*. The habit of *A. elatior* is upright. Flowers, which are star-shaped and have a creamy, purple spotted outside, will form at the base of the plants and can only be seen when the plant hasn't been potted up too deeply.

A. sichuanensis also originates in China and is a much later introduction, with most of them entering the trade in the past 10-15 years. A lot of cultivars sold in the UK were introduced by Crug Farm Plants, but the first to be introduced was 'Spotty' which came from Cistus Nursery in the US. Most of the cultivars will have a form of spotting on the leaf, from very spotty, such as 'Warp Drive' to barely spotted cultivars such as 'Rarely Spotted'. Apart from the flower, which is dark red and star-shaped, this species can be identified by its serration on the leaf edge. This species has a more open habit than *A. elatior* and has long leaves which gracefully bend over to the sides.

CULTIVATION

Aspidistra are very easy to look after and neglect is almost key. They do not like being over-watered, so a small amount of water once every 7-10 days is sufficient. They prefer a position out of direct sunlight and can survive in very low light-levels. Variegated cultivars such as *A. elatior* 'Okame' still need to be kept away from direct sunlight, but will prefer a slightly lighter position as this will ensure well-variegated leaves. Yellow leaves on *Aspidistra* are usually nothing else than old leaves dying down, but can also be a sign of overwatering. They do not require a lot of fertiliser, liquid seaweed once a month is plenty, and will grow in any open compost. Coconut coir and bark chippings seem to be the best peat free combination for this.

A. elatior and *A. sichuanensis* are completely hardy in the whole of the UK. When grown outside they do best in a pot with good drainage. Slugs and snails do like the taste of them, so ensure a seasonal treatment with **nematodes is executed**. When grown as a houseplant they can sometimes suffer from red spider mite. These creatures thrive in dry and hot conditions so a regular misting of the plant should prevent this. If the infestation becomes too bad then placing the plant outdoors should help. It is a common myth that *Aspidistra* are pollinated by slugs, probably because slugs

love the leaves so much that they are always around them when grown outside. *Aspidistra* flowers have evolved to resemble a mushroom and are pollinated by fungus gnats.

PROPAGATION

Aspidistra can easily be split. This can be done any time of year. The rhizome can be snapped off where it branches off. Make sure each part you take off has at least one leaf and is at least an inch in length.

RECOMMENDED CULTIVARS

***Aspidistra elatior* 'Lennon's Song'**

A yellow-variegated cultivar with very wide and tall leaves. A strong grower which will often produce flowers at the base. Originally selected by Robin Lennon in California.

***Aspidistra elatior* 'Okame' syn 'Variegata'**

This variegated cultivar has large white bands along the leaf. When grown in a lighter position this variegation will remain stable, yet variable. In darker spots there is a chance of them reverting to all green. When this occurs the green parts should be taken off as otherwise they will take over.

***Aspidistra elatior* 'Sekko-kan'**

A variegated cultivar with an abundance of white stripes all along the leaf. When it matures the tips of the leaves will turn white completely. An old Japanese cultivar with great vigour.

***Aspidistra sichuanensis* 'Well Spotted'**

A beautiful cultivar with a large amount of spots over the entire leaf. A strong grower with good hardiness.

***Aspidistra sichuanensis* 'Kinboshi'**



Aspidistra 'Stars and Stripes' ©P Oostenbrink