

A Plant of Good Fortune for the Holidays

Green means many things to many people. Green can represent tranquility, since it has been shown to lower a person's blood pressure or it can represent jealousy if a person becomes 'green with envy'. For December, green has become associated with the Holidays and for the gardener it represents a plant with evergreen foliage since most other plants are now bare! There are numerous evergreen plants, but it is rare that you can get a plant that is also soothing to the eyes and will make your friends 'green with envy'! Every time I walk people through the Asian Hillside Garden at Rutgers Gardens, regardless of the month, I always get the same response: "What is that plant?". The plant in question is *Rohdea japonica*, the Sacred Lily. For the Holiday Season, it is the perfect plant for the garden.

If grown in the Asian Hillside Garden, one can only conclude that it is native to Asia, which is correct; Southern Japan and Southwestern China to be precise. It has arching leaves up to 18" long and 3" wide, which produce a noticeably bold and coarse texture during any month of the year. *Rohdea* was initially described and named as *Orontium japonicum* by our old friend Carl Thunberg and later renamed by Albrecht Wilhelm Roth. It was named in honor of the botanist, Michael Rohde (1782-1812), who lived in Bremen Germany. In Japan it is known as a plant of 'good fortune' and is given as a gift at housewarming parties or as a birthday present. Although discovered in the late 1700's, it was not until the Victorian period that it finally made an appearance in the United States, and then only as a houseplant. Since it is native to dark, shady woodlands, it worked well indoors. Gradually, the plant migrated into the garden where it has proven to be completely winter hardy and evergreen in zone 6, and will survive zone 5 with heavy mulching!

Rohdea was originally lumped into the very large lily family, but was recently split off into the convallariaceae, alias the Lily of the Valley family. The flowers are small, green and not showy or fragrant, but it is the highly ornamental red fruits that color up in November that reveal its understandable association with Lily of the Valley. The fruits are about 3/8" in diameter and appear on 4" stems in cluster of up to 20 fruits! Fruits typically persist until mid spring, providing a 5 month period of impact.

Sacred Lilies are easy to grow. The plants are rhizomatous and slowly spread, developing large colonies over time. The primary requirement is deciduous shade, allowing filtered light to reach the leaves during winter. It is not fussy about soils, but performs best in those that are rich in organic matter and not prone to excessive drought. It will tolerate drier soils once established, but needs regular irrigation during establishment. It is also an ideal plant for combining with other shade loving favorites. For the moister garden, consider combining it with various evergreen ferns and Hostas, while in drier soils, Hellebores look great. In the Asian Hillside Garden, it is combined with a mass of the golden form of Sweet Flag, *Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon'. The slender yellow foliage of the *Acorus* looks dynamite next to the bold green foliage. Plus, for those obsessed with purchasing the truly unique, there are over 600 variegated forms registered in Japan that spread more slowly, but really brighten up that dark corner of the garden.

Obviously, for the Holidays, *Rohdea* is a fashionably appropriate garden addition. It's seasonally appropriate colors from the rich green foliage and glowing red fruits, combined with

the Japanese tradition for being gifted, nearly mandate it for a December highlight. However, the wonderful texture and interest it displays throughout the remaining 11 months reinforces the well-deserved title of a 'Plant of Good Fortune'!