

MARTAGONS ARE EASY TO GROW

NORTH STAR LILY SOCIETY

March 2014

Martagon lilies, are a mix of hybrids between *Lilium martagon* and several closely related species. Martagon lilies are native from central Europe to Siberia and Mongolia to China, Japan and Korea. Modern martagons are crosses between the European and other martagon type species. The most common crosses with *Lilium martagon* (white, maroon and spotted forms) are the yellow Japanese *hansonii* and the orange Chinese *tsingtauense* lilies. *L. martagon* can cross with the North American *L. kelloggii* and hybrids are also been (via tissue culture) made with Asiatic lilies. The Asiatic crosses are called martasians.

In nature all the related martagon species grow in cold to extremely cold climates, such as those that go to 40 below, the same temperature in Celsius and Fahrenheit. Typically, martagons seem to tolerate acidic to alkaline soils and grow well in full sun to very heavy shade in well drained soils. They do best in an East facing location where shade begins at 2 p.m. each day. Martagons do exceptionally well in lightly wooded areas along with the lily related hostas. Martagons will compete very well with *ligularia*, fiddle head ferns, fireweed, hemp nettle and wild raspberries receiving very little in the way of weeding. In the open garden, with little or no shade, martagons seem to really thrive on heavy applications of peat moss given as a mulch in early spring. This 1 to 2 inch layer of peat moss also helps controls annual weeds.

Martagon seedling crosses can range from three to almost nine feet tall (1 - 3 metres) especially when grown under light shade. Martagons of course come in every colour and shade except blue.

Once martagons are established in any given area of the garden they can virtually be left forever. Asiatic and other lilies on the other hand have to be moved every few years or their vigour and size will deteriorate. One martagon bulb in a favourable location will double every couple of years so that at the end of 6 to 7 years you will have a spectacular vigorous clump of vibrant martagons. Martagons do have a bad habit of not emerging above ground in some seasons. They will stay perfectly healthy underground and show up vigorously the next year or even remain dormant for as long as two years.

How do I multiply my martagons?

Patience in Growing Martagons.

Buy 5 to 10 martagon bulbs in early September and plant them immediately 5 inches deep (base of bulb to the top) in well-drained soil. Plant in different locations in your garden from full sun to half shade. Spring planting is only really successful if you purchase pot grown plants or bulbs that have been refrigerated over winter and planted immediately. Martagon bulbs planted in the spring generally will not flower in the first year and may not even emerge above ground. They may stay dormant until the next season. If all goes well these individual bulbs will develop into major clumps of vigorous martagons over the next 5 - 10 years. In some gardens and in some locations (including my own garden) some martagon types unfortunately will multiply and grow very slowly or hardly at all.

Rapid Martagon Multiplication

If you are already growing martagons or intend purchasing bulbs in August or September consider scaling. Scaling is the procedure whereby you remove the outer scales of a martagon bulb and effectively reduce the size of the original bulb by up to 50%. Do not be squeamish, you want more martagons, yes!

As soon as you have scaled the martagon bulbs from late July to October you can do the following:

- a) Plant the original scaled bulb 5 inches deep right away and at the two inch level in the planting hole after filling the first three inches place the martagon bulb scales. If you do this in late July or August in Western Canada or September further south in the U.S. these martagon scales will form bulblets, overwinter and emerge as seedlings around the original bulb. If you scale in mid-September, October or later the scales will form bulblets but they may not emerge the next spring but in the following spring. That is 19 - 20 months after planting.
- b) You may also plant the scales in rows 2 - 3 inches deep one inch apart and carefully mark the row naming each martagon since the emergence of the seedlings from the scales may skip a year. Weed the row carefully. I once did this with hundreds of Mrs. R. O. Backhouse scales and ended up with a thousand plants for sale in 4 years. If your soil is heavy clay you may consider filling the top two inches of the scale row with the scales with a brand potting soil, e.g. #4 Sunshine mix, a coarse mixture of peat, perlite and vermiculite.
- c) The Evans Method. I scale my bulbs that I have selected and need to multiply in September. I place the scales in peat moss in clear plastic containers with tight lids. The sort of container that you buy olives in at the grocery store. Each plastic see through container will hold a pint (500 cc) of peat moss. I will put 3 layers of scales into the peat moss container numbering from 10 to 30 scales depending on the size of the scales. The peat moss that you use must be barely moist. When you strongly squeeze the peat moss your hands are barely moist. Moisten the peat moss if it needs moistening the day before you use it. After stuffing the peat moss and the scales into the container mark the lid and label with a non-removable magic marker. The scales will not suffocate since plastic allows the slow entry of oxygen but not the loss of water vapour. The sealed plastic containers should then be placed in a transparent garbage bag to ensure against any moisture loss and to facilitate observation from time to time. The acidic peat moss will protect the scales against fungi and bacteria. The plastic bags along with plastic containers inside are then left at room temperature (70 to 80° F) until New Year's Day, January 1st. In that time the scales will have formed very nice bulblets (at least most varieties). These bulblets will not grow until they have been vernalized, i.e. given a prolonged cold period at around 32° F (0° C) for 3 - 4 months. You can do this with 2 or 200 containers depending on spare refrigerator space, i.e. the coldest part, the bottom shelf. Do not worry if the containers freeze sometimes in the refrigerator and the temperature hits 27 - 28° F. This will not kill the bulblets.

What do I do next?

In April or early May in Minnesota depending on snow melt plant out the containers. NO - I do not pull the scales apart. I merely dump out the peat moss and rooted scales with bulblets into one hand and then place the mass of scales, bulblets and roots directly 4 inches deep into the garden soil facing upwards. I cover them with an inch of sandy loam soil, sand or potting soil mix.

If you pull the scales and bulbs apart they check and grow very poorly - its DO NOT DISTURB. At the spot where you planted in a week or weeks you will see the emerging bulblets perhaps 10 - 30 green

shoots in a clump. These are your new martagons that you can dig up and separate in a few years, always in August or September. An occasional bulblet will flower in the first year of planting.

- d) If you do not have plastic containers you can use small "Ziploc" plastic bags and do the same as in the Evans Method above. Those smaller Ziploc bags should also be put into larger Ziploc bags or clear plastic bags to avoid any moisture loss. Plant the ensuing mass of roots, scales and bulblets as previously described.

This year I planted out over 100 new varieties and some old ones and my success rate was around 95%. I will have them in first flower usually in 1 - 3 years.

Growing Martagons from seeds.

If you are already growing martagons then be sure to collect the seeds in August or early September before the pods shatter from your better varieties. Most martagons will set seed, some more than others.

- a) You can sow the seeds immediately into the ground (semi shaded is best, East aspect) about 1 inch deep. Water in and if you have a mild fall (even in Alberta sometimes) the tiny martagon seedlings will emerge in April - May. With care and weeding you will have martagons in flower in 3 - 7 years. If you seed them late in October the seedlings may not emerge until the next year.
- b) You can exactly follow the Evans Method for scales or use Ziploc bags using around 50 - 200 seeds per container, anything from 1 - 200 of the seeds will germinate. Follow exactly as outlined in the Evans Method even to planting the container contents or bags into 4 inch deep holes and covering with an inch of potting mix. I do this in rows. The seedlings will emerge like blades of grass in a week or so after the 3 month chilling period in late April or early May.
- c) Collect the seed as in a) above and scatter the seed in your shaded or shrubby areas of the garden and in a few years, if you look carefully, you will notice martagons popping up everywhere. I have got martagons all through my wood lot, under trees and shrubs and even one that is now flowering on the edge of a shaded but poorly kept and mown lawn. They will effectively naturalize on their own in favourable locations in our Northern climate.

And you thought that you could not grow martagons, eh!