

IN PRAISE OF...CANNAS

Roger Trigg

While not really within the ambit of 'hardy plant', the familiar canna is widely grown to provide vibrant colour in the second half of summer and is often used as a focal point in hot borders or as an essential component of a tropical border. A frequent complaint, however, is that they fail to flower, especially when grown from newly purchased rhizomes.

My eyes were opened one year when visiting the Savill Garden in late June. My cannas, recently planted out, were a foot or so tall while theirs were 3 - 4 feet high! 'How have they done that?' I asked myself. The answer was obvious; they'd been started very early under glass.

The truth is, I believe, that cannas grow continuously without enjoying a dormant period. After all, they are plants originating in the tropical and sub-tropical Americas where the temperature seldom drops below 20°C, where there is 6-8 hours of sunlight each day and rainfall is abundant. Given those lush conditions, why stop growing? So how can we in the UK best replicate these conditions?

Their season starts the day after the first severe frost in autumn. The leaves of the summer growth will be hanging forlornly, but take a look at the base of the plants and you will likely see fresh shoots emerging. To get a mid-summer show of flowers next season it is essential to preserve this new growth before a second night's frost gets to it. Cut down the old stems, lift the rhizomes and examine them carefully and you should see, besides the new shoots, extra growing points either as whitish sprouts or pinkish carbuncles, together with a healthy set of fleshy roots. You may well be able to divide the rhizomes at this point. Each section needs a shoot or potential growing point. A pruning saw makes the best tool for cutting the rhizomes. Cut away any piece of rhizome without roots or a growing point. Pot up the pieces of rhizome immediately in, say, a 50/50 mixture of John Innes No. 3 and multipurpose compost and grow on in a frost-free greenhouse over winter. Pot on if necessary. By April you can begin hardening off for planting out at the end of May. By then the stems may well be 3-4 feet tall, just like those I saw at the Savill Garden!



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Canna rhizomes, trimmed and ready to pot up

Compare the above scenario with rhizomes bought in plastic bags from a garden centre. These will probably have had their roots trimmed off and will therefore take some time to get going, unless treated to bottom heat for a head start. Either way, by planting-out time there will be very little top growth and slim chance of the plant flowering before the end of summer.



Canna 'Orange Punch'

Most varieties of canna lie in the yellow-orange-red part of the spectrum, some with variegated or coloured foliage. *Canna 'Wyoming'* is a popular variety (with AGM credentials), getting to 8 feet tall with ease, sporting orange flowers and purplish foliage. For an all-year-round display in a conservatory, look out for a dwarf variety called *C. 'Orange Punch'*.

Cannas are happier out of full sun but will enjoy all the moisture and nutrition you care to give them. Be careful when dead-heading, as a second flower cluster will appear just below that which has finished.

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