

A Holiday Plant for Many Seasons to Come

Each December I enjoy highlighting those plants appropriate for the Holiday season that are less frequently considered as season appropriate! Obviously, the Poinsettia is the plant of preference for adorning many homes during this season. I love the colorful display that Poinsettias provide, but I always reflect on a comment a client retorted when I gifted her a plant – “Oh no, I really do not want another Poinsettia I am going to kill.” The more I thought about her comment, the more I realized it was true. Wouldn't it be nice to receive a plant that would live not for one season, but for many to come? One such seasonally appropriate plant is the white and golden forms of Snake Plant formerly known to most in botanical spheres as *Sansevieria*. The selection ‘Silver Queen’ is pictured above.



Yes, I hate to say it, but the botanists have been busy again and the plant I came to know as *Sansevieria* has now been merged into the genus *Dracaena*, providing a new chapter for the plants' name. Fortunately, it still remains in the Asparagaceae or Asparagus Family. The former genus of *Sansevieria* had roughly 70 species, native to arid regions of Africa and S. Asia. The number of species grew to around 120 when it was merged with *Dracaena*, with species native to Africa, Madagascar, southern Asia and northern Australia. The most commonly grown form is *Dracaena (Sansevieria) trifasciata*, a native to arid portions of Western Africa, specifically Nigeria east to the Congo. It bares the somewhat unfortunate common name of Snake Plant, since many of the taller forms resemble a snake rearing up to attack! It is also called Bow String Hemp in recognition of the strong fibers found within the rigid foliage. The original name of *Sansevieria* has an interesting lineage. The Dutch spice merchant and botanist Caspar Commelin (1668-1731) received 2 specimens of this species from Africa, which he grew in his garden and described in his 1697-1701 edition of ‘Hort Medici Amstelodamensis Rariorum Plantarum’. His nephew Johannes Commelin (1629–1692) created the illustrations found in the book and based upon these illustrations, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) placed the plant in the genus *Aloe*. However, a professor of botany at the University of Naples named Vincent Petagna (1734-1810) thought better and believed it unique enough to have its own genus. He proposed the name *Sansevevierinia*, in honor of the Prince of San-Severo, Raimondo di Sangro. The final spelling of the name was selected in 1794 by the Swiss naturalist Carl Thunberg (1710-1771) who had an impassioned interest in plants from Africa and Japan. That name held true for over 200 years until in 2017, the British botanist David John Mabberley (1948-) proposed altering the genus based upon genetic analysis.

The genus name of *Dracaena* comes from the Greek *Drákaina* for female dragon! It was first, although improperly published in 1767 by the Italian naturalist Domingo Vandelli (1735-1816), with Linnaeus coincidentally publishing the name properly in the same year. The name was

inspired by the bright red resin of *Dracaena draco*, which with a stretch of the imagination might resemble dragon's blood. The species epithet of *trifasciata* refers to the three different colored bands of green that horizontally traverse the leaves as *Fasciat* is Latin for banded while *Tri* of course means three. Although this is a rather common species these days, it was only described and named in 1903 by the Scottish botanist David Prain (1857-1944).

Although the common name's reference to snakes may not be the most appealing, it is truly an awesome houseplant. As odd as this may sound, I was first introduced to *Dracaena trifasciata* at my grandmother's funeral where it was part of the floral display at the funeral home. That was 1969. The plant was brought home, and remained in the very same 3" deep container for another 50 years, thriving with very little care and typically placed in the low light of a north facing window throughout the winter. With mostly just a root mass remaining in the container and no soil, I divided and transplanted the plant into larger pots during its 50-year anniversary, upon which the plant exploded with new growth and flowered! The upright spears of foliage literally emerge from the soil without any stems and offer an interesting vertical texture for the 'indoor garden'. The plants slowly spread via underground rhizomes, with the tall forms producing clusters of leaves reaching close to 2' tall while the dwarf forms develop rosettes of foliage to 6-10".



Plants will infrequently bloom, producing numerous flowers along 18-24" tall stalks that appear from the center of a leaf clusters as seen in Picture 2. Groupings of 3-8 greenish-white flowers develop along the stalks with one flower opening at a time in each cluster, presenting an attractive display. The 4 petals roll backwards, revealing 6 prominent anthers with a central stigma. The flowers are wonderfully fragrant, often coming into bloom in late spring when plants have become pot-bound.



There are many selections available that are seasonally appropriate such as 'Moonshine' (Picture 3). It is a relatively new selection, with a silvery glow to the 3-4" wide and 2' tall leaves. The attractive silvery white cast to the leaves is at its best when grown in bright light. Another form that will provide a splash of white is 'Bantel's Sensation' (Picture 4). It features broad



white vertical stripes on 2” wide by 3’ tall foliage, providing a strong vertical accent.



‘Silver Queen’ (Picture 1) is yet another nearly all white form that literally glows throughout the year! If you desire a darker colored form, consider ‘Black Gold’, as seen in Picture 8 from a display at Longwood Gardens. The leaves bare such a dark green central coloration as to appear almost black with a bright golden margin. For those preferring a shorter rosette form, ‘Hahnii’ is an older, but still very attractive form, patented by Sylvan Frank Hahn of Pittsburgh PA in 1941. The deep

green rosettes are composed of 3” wide leaves that reach 4-6” tall. Often called the Bird’s Nest Snake Plant, there are numerous golden forms available. ‘Jade Dwarf Marginated’ (Picture 5), has a broad band of yellow along the leaf margin while ‘Golden Flame’ (Picture 6) has predominantly bright yellow foliage with green central stripes.

Come summer, all of these plants can be brought outside and grown in partial to near full sun, where they will thrive just as well as in the darker corners of a home! Once again, a gradual transition is recommended to prevent leaf scorch if you wish to transport your indoor plant into full sun. Several years back Longwood Gardens featured *Dracaena (Sansevieria) cylindrica* in a container display located in full, baking sun (Picture 7).

Dracaena cylindrica is a native of Angola with grayish green



tube-like or

cylindrical leaves. The cylindrical leaves serve to reduce the surface area of the leaf along with the corresponding loss of water through transpiration. It is a rather comical looking form since it looks for all the world like a Jesters Hat and provides a much different texture and appearance than its cousins. I was shocked how it could tolerate a hot and sunny summer exposure while also being perfectly



content in much darker conditions throughout winter!

Aside from Snake Plant being one tough plant, it also works to improve your indoor environment. Jade Plants, botanically called *Crassula* became the namesake for a photosynthetic process called Crassulacean Acid Metabolism or CAM for short. This process is highlighted by

the stomata opening at night to releases O₂ and absorb CO₂ rather than during the day in an effort to reduce water vapor loss through the foliage. The thick, succulent foliage of Snake Plant also employs this method of photosynthesis, allowing it to survive in the dry regions of Africa and preferring minimal amounts of water as a houseplant. It was also discovered through experiments conducted by NASA that Snake Plant will reduce small amounts of harmful nitrogen oxides, formaldehydes and benzenes present within the home environment. Not only is Snake Plant a cool looking plant, it serves to improve your health!

As is true with many popular plants and in particular house plants, one selection often becomes the predominant selection that is propagated and sold ad nauseam. Regardless of the countless benefits of the plant, this often results in a plant being discounted as boring and all the wonderful cultivars are also discounted. Whether you choose to call it *Sansevieria* or *Dracaena*, consider gifting some of these colorful selections during this Holiday Season. This plant is of an incredibly easy culture and will provide beauty for this season and – as my grandmother unknowingly taught me – for countless years to come! Happy Holidays!



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