

Lavant Horticultural Society

'The Plant Heritage National Collection of Hedychium Flowering Gingers'

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Andrew's engaging talk clearly captured the interest of the audience as his passion for and knowledge of this beautifully exotic family of plants shone through. He acquired his first flowering ginger some 20 years ago; now his National Collection consists of 242 different species and hybrids of hedychium, now grown in a glasshouse previously used for commercial tomato growing (he does not heat the glasshouse). In spite of the scale of this, hedychiums remain a pastime for Andrew, as he has a full time job in the UK's Plant Quarantine Service.

He gave a short introduction to the [National Plant Collections](#).

Hedychiums are related to bananas, heliconia, strelitzia and canna. Their rhizomes are edible, but are not as tasty as culinary ginger (*Zingiber*) and can be woody. Hedychiums are found in a wide area of Asia, from India through southern China, from Nepal down to Vietnam and even the south of Thailand. It is remarkable in that the hardiness of the same species can vary depending upon the location from which the plant originated: a plant originally taken from Nepal being hardier than a plant of exactly the same species taken from Vietnam. The hardiest can be planted outside here, whereas the less hardy will need overwintering indoors. They naturally grow as an understory in lightly wooded areas. However, here they do better in full sun. Hedychiums produce their own insecticidal compounds and so are generally pest free, except that red spider mite in hot dry environments.

Growing flowering gingers

Hedychiums can be grown from seed, but the seed must be fresh, best sown as the days start to lengthen in February. However, they are more easily propagated by splitting the rhizomes. It is important not to cut the rhizome when the plant is dormant as it will rot – it should only be done when the plant is actively growing.

Hedychiums need a soil temperature of 10°C to grow. They should be fed throughout growing season until mid-September with a balanced fertiliser with not too much nitrogen. A good balance of NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) is not everything – other elements are also necessary, which are absent from some of the most popular tomato feeds. The reduction in the use of fossil fuels in the UK has resulted in a large drop of sulphur in the atmosphere and consequently in the soil. He suggested sprinkling some Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate) on a patch of the lawn and seeing the improvement compared to the rest [the magnesium also contributes to healthy plant growth].

Hedychiums must be watered regularly throughout the growing season – they are very thirsty and can be almost aquatic in the heat of summer. They will keep flowering in the garden for several weeks if kept adequately watered. They do not need staking.

When the foliage has been hit by the first frosts the stems should be cut down to ground level. In the case of the more hardy varieties, the stems will come away of their own accord. The plant should then be protected with a mulch of wood chips, rather than compost. All

but the hardiest should be overwintered indoors – an unheated greenhouse will do fine. Unlike cannas, hedychiums do not like being lifted for winter storage – root disturbance could mean they will not flower the following year. So it is best to grow varieties that are not hardy in large pots that can be brought inside in the winter without disturbing the roots. It may be possible to overwinter some hedychiums without cutting them back. However, no good flowers will be produced on overwintered stems because of low light levels, so all stems should be cut down by January.

Hedychiums are regarded as invasive in some countries, such as New Zealand and the Azores, but this is not a problem in the UK.