

Plants are often given common names that describe characteristics of the plant. The common name ‘cast iron plant’ offers a very good description of the tough but often forgotten landscape plant, *Aspidistra elatior*.

We often like to think of the cast iron plant as ‘one of our own’. This non-native was originally introduced into the United States from Asia in 1824. *Aspidistra* quickly became the staple ground cover plant of shady gardens from zone 7 and south. In historical southern gardens, the shaded understories of magnificent moss-draped live oaks are still sustained by this dependable, long-lived perennial.

This is one of those often overlooked plants that seems too good to be true. Imagine a landscape plant that has no serious pests, is an upright evergreen that can fill in as a groundcover, thrives in heavy shade, and has a glossy dark-green color. Add the facts that it survives our hot, humid summers, drought conditions, and poor sandy soils. Don’t we all have a place for this iron gem?

Two planting sites to avoid are those with poorly drained soil or too much sunlight. Although they are as tough as skilletts, the cast iron plant will respond well to soil amended with organic matter, a balanced fertilizer in the spring or summer, and supplemental water during drought conditions.

The species *Aspidistra elatior* has wide, lance-shaped green leaves and reaches a height of one to two feet. New cultivars of this shade-loving plant can offer a little spark of light to a dark corner of the garden. These new plants have leaves that appear splashed with spots, stripes or frostings of yellow and white highlights. Miniature cultivars have also been developed with finer textured foliage.

Our winter conditions often cause winter burn on cast iron plant leaves. Trim back browned foliage in the spring or cut the entire planting to the ground each year to provide fresh new growth. Too much sun, rich soil or excessive fertilizer may also cause leaves to become faded and unattractive. Variegated cultivars also tend to lose coloration in these conditions.

Although *Aspidistra* is a spreading groundcover, growth is slow and not threatening to our native plants. Clumps can easily be divided at any time of year, with spring being the most favorable. Try growing some of your transplants in pretty containers placed in shaded corners of the patio or porch. This tough ‘cast iron plant’ can even grace a container in a dark kitchen corner.

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