

Adventurous Plants

HOW TO GROW SAUROMATUM VENOSUM

If ever there was a plant with an identity crisis, *Sauromatum venosum* is it! Over the years, this plant has had so many name changes that it is hard to keep up. Until fairly recently, the genus *Sauromatum* had been swallowed up by *Typhonium*. Now it's back to *Sauromatum* again. Just to add to the confusion, *Sauromatum venosum* is also often seen for sale under the even older name of *Arum cornutum* - an incorrect name that is often assigned to *Dracunculus vulgaris*, a completely different plant. And it's not just the Latin that is a little unclear - the common English name 'Voodoo Lily' has been used to cover a handful of other species too. What a mess!

Despite the botanical confusion, *Sauromatum venosum* should be high on the list for every Aroid grower to have in their collection. Impressive both in flower and in leaf, it is also very easy to care for. The following notes should give you all the information required to succeed with this wonderful plant.

Sauromatum venosum 'Indian Giant'

'Indian Giant' is the name given to a particular form of *Sauromatum venosum* that is renowned for producing extra large plants. In fact, all parts of the plant are larger than the typical form, including the size of the inflorescence. The tubers can reach huge proportions and weigh up to around 2kg. Cultivation is exactly the same as for the standard form.

Plant Description

Sauromatum venosum is winter dormant and grows from an underground tuber. The tuber acts as storage for the nutrients and starchy reserves that the plant requires for both flowering and growing leaves.

Growth will start in the spring. If the tuber is sufficiently large it will flower before putting out any leaves or roots. Consequently, it is possible to simply sit the tuber on a windowsill with no pot or soil, and watch as it produces its remarkable inflorescence. The inflorescence is large and impressive. The tall spadix can be 30cm long, and the dramatically coloured spathe folds back to reveal a striking pattern of red and yellow. As a method of attracting pollinating flies, the spadix emits a nauseating smell of decaying meat and dung. Whilst this is not as pungent as many species of *Amorphophallus*, they still smell pretty bad!

Successful pollination results in large clusters of black or purple berries, rather like an oversized blackberry. Each berry usually contains one, or occasionally, two seeds. Seed will only be set if two separate plants are flowering simultaneously, as a single plant is incapable of self fertilization.

Once flowering has finished, or if the tuber is not yet flowering sized, roots are produced from the top of the tuber, along with a long, speckled petiole terminating in the leaf. If not already planted, now is the time to do so. Usually two leaves are produced throughout a growing season, occasionally a third can appear. Large plants can reach around 60cm in height.

The leaf is divided into several leaflets that hang off a central mid-rib, known as a Rachis, and makes a wonderfully lush texture when planted in an exotic style border or as part of a herbaceous bed. A group of plants together make a very eye-catching foliage display.

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Plant Care

Sauromatum venosum is easy to grow either in pots or planted directly in the ground. Although I have never found this species to be fussy with regards to soil type, aim for a rich soil and ensure that drainage is reasonably good. This is a greedy plant and regular feeding will ensure that the tuber bulks up quickly and therefore increases the chance of flowering the following year. Feed with a dilute high N feed as the leaf is emerging. Later in the season, change to a balanced general purpose fertilizer.

Plant the tuber around 5cm deep.

A position out of the intense midday sun will suit Sauromatum venosum best, as the leaves can dry and scorch. I have found that if grown in deep shade the petioles stretch for the light and can become weak and floppy, potentially requiring stakes to keep them upright.



Winter Care

Sauromatum venosum has proved hardy here in East Devon, although I tend to lift most of my tubers for the winter. If keeping them in the ground, good drainage is very important for long term success.

If you decide to lift the tubers, simply wash them clean and allow to dry. Afterwards, store them cool and frost free for the winter.

Propagation

Seed can be sown at any time of year, although spring is recommended. Viability is good, and a high germination percentage is usually achieved. A heated propagator giving gentle bottom heat is useful. Sow into regular seed or potting compost.

Tubers readily produce offsets. In fact, I often find young Sauromatum venosum popping up in the garden from tiny tubers that get distributed in spent soil from my pots. Offsets planted in rich soil will grow quickly, and can reach flowering size after three seasons growth.



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