

The lotus is sacred in some cultures, but it's easy to grow in the subtropics

BY KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

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A hot pink lotus variety. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

The near-mythic lotus is easy to grow here in the subtropics. And you don't really even need a proper pond.

When I was a kid up north, I didn't think the Everglades was a real place. It seemed like a made-up thing you'd see in cartoons. It might have once existed, but of course no longer does — we were pretty sheltered in 1970s Long Island. The lotus falls into this category, legendary to a degree that raises its very existence to the status of a myth. But it's fairly reliable and easy to cultivate.

Our staff recently revamped a small pool at Fairchild Garden to include a few lotuses. They produce large, flattish peltate leaves similar to a lily pad, but they are much larger, lack a leaf notch, and are emergent well above the water's surface. They look very much like the quarter-sized *Hydrocotyle* sp., aka pennyworts, we've all got on our lawns. Those are often sold for aquariums, but unlike lotus, pennyworts are not true aquatic plants.

You can purchase a lotus rhizome for yourself, or grow them from seeds very easily. Seeds look like small black olives, but are rock hard. You'll need to scarify them by filing through the tough exterior seed coat or by hitting them lightly with a hammer — but just enough to crack the exterior.

Place the seeds in a glass of water. Within a week or so you will notice green, the first leaf, emerging from the submerged seeds. Given some time the leaves will emerge above the water. After roots develop, you may plant in aquatic plant soil covered by gravel within a pot of water, or go soilless; our lotuses are planted in either turface (a baked clay material), or silica sand with some composted manure added. Both seem to be flourishing. If you grow them from tubers, you can skip the seed steps and go right to the pot.

The container can be an in-ground garden pond, but a pot is possibly even better so you can position it in full sun, and it makes a dramatic statement to see a lotus emerge from a freestanding container. The base of the plant needs to be only about a foot under water. If you do have a garden pond, a potted lotus can always be placed into the pond, pot and all.



Lotus leaves can grow a foot or more across. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN



The sacred lotus flower is always mesmerizing. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

Nelumbo nucifera is the name of the sacred lotus, but it has an American sibling: *N. lutea*. The Asian species' flowers range from a hot pink to peaceful pale pink to linen white, while the American lotus produces a lovely pale butter-cream yellow flower. There are many cultivated varieties offering even more color variations.

The lotus in Asia has of course many symbolic and cultural references, and certainly deserves its status not only for its pure beauty but as a food source. It appears on the flag of Macau. In Buddhism the flower represents enlightenment rising above the murky, muddy water beneath, more or less.

My favorite lotus attribute is that mentioned in Homer's "Odyssey" of the lotus eaters, people who consumed the lotus to remain in a state of anesthetized, peaceful indifference. Doesn't sound too bad, but the reality is Homer could have been referring to any number of plants. Lotus eaters supposedly ate the fruit, and I can tell you, lotus fruit looks about as appetizing as a box of rocks.

When fruit appears, you won't fail to notice the cone-shaped structure mature to a woody brown with seeds ready to drop to the water. Once they do (or are first collected by yourself) the remaining holey structure can trigger trypophobia, the phobia some people have of holes.

When you watch a lotus flower open over a day, you too will realize how the lotus gained such a reputation as a magic plant; it is an absolute perfect beauty.

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.



This cone-shaped structure is the fruit of the lotus. As it matures, it will turn brown, and seeds can be harvested for regrowing. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN