

Nelumbo nucifera – Sacred Lotus

Nelumbo nucifera, commonly known as Sacred Lotus is an aquatic perennial, originally from the Indian sub-continent and it can grow in a very wide range of climatic conditions. The Lotus is one of the most beautiful and best known of wetland plants and is now grown in still waters all over the world. Sacred Lotus has had a mystical role for centuries. It is said to represent the power of the soul to rise from the muddy waters of the lower realms of consciousness into the sunlight of a better life.

It grows-up to a height of perhaps 5m depending on the depth of the pond or watercourse it is growing in where the roots are firmly planted in the mud beneath the water surface and the plant has long stems to which the leaves and flowers are attached. The large circular leaves to 60cm float on the surface and the flowers above it. Flowers open early in the morning and can be up to 25cm wide but are short lived. The fruit is a conical shaped pod with the seeds arranged in holes - when the seeds are ripe, they are released because the pod bends downwards to the water.

Sacred Lotus has long been a useful traditional food source - the flowers, seeds, young leaves and rhizomes are edible, while the big mature leaves, up to 60cm in diameter, can be used to wrap food for steaming. In the Asian kitchen, the petals are placed in soups or used as garnish.

The seeds can be roasted while the rhizomes can be boiled.

The plant also has a wide range of applications in traditional medicine.

Lotus plants are aggressive and are perhaps best planted into containers in the water garden to keep them from escaping and permanently rooting into the soil beneath the water, although they are not totally detrimental as they are very effective at purifying waste water. Once established in the soil they can be difficult to get rid of so containerising is a good way to enjoy them without the danger of them becoming invasive. Lotus should be planted in a wide shallow container filled with garden soil or potting mix, garden soil can be mixed with $\frac{1}{2}$ well-composted cow manure. Once established they benefit from fertilisation.

Lotus seed can be stored for several years at the room temperature and has a very long life with records showing it can germinate after many hundreds of years if stored correctly. Propagation is straightforward after pre-treatment - seeds are scarified (abraded to thin the seed wall).

Propagation

Nelumbo have a very hard outer casing that needs to be breached to allow water to penetrate the seed. This is best done by scarification – the thinning of the side seed wall by light scraping or sandpapering.

After scarification soak your seed in water kept at between 18 and 22°C. The seed will swell to perhaps double its original size and the seed coat will become soft and leathery. The water will become cloudy or discoloured and should be changed every few days.

Germination can occur at any time from a few days to 28 days. Once the seed splits and produces a green shoot or radicle, sow it in a broad (at least 40cm) pot with a depth of 40cm or more in a moist quality loam. Sow the seed sideways and bury it to a depth equal to the width of the seed.

Maintain the seedling in the pot until a good root ball has developed and plant out in your pond in its final position.

