

***Nymphaea 'Caerulea'***  
*historic waterlily with various names*

Sacred blue lily, Egyptian blue waterlily, Egyptian lotus, blue lotus and Blue Lotus of the Nile are some of the historic names for *Nymphaea 'Caerulea.'* This tropical day-bloomer is a species waterlily native to North and Central Africa and once flourished in the Nile River Delta where it is now endangered.



***Nymphaea 'Caerulea'***

Historically and culturally significant in Southeast Asia especially Egypt it symbolizes creation and rebirth and represents the sun, opening in the morning and closing at night. The flower shape is seen in art, stone carvings and is décor on structures throughout the region. It is reported that the body of King Tut was covered in 'Blue Lotus' petals when the tomb was opened in 1922.

The upright pointed petals of the *N. 'Caerulea'* flower gives it a star-shape centered with yellow stamens. Petals are white at the base with intense violet-blue tips. Flowers bloom against a background of round plain green pads.

I had read and heard about this waterlily but it was not until 2005 that I had it in my water garden. How it came to be there began in early 2000 with a telephone call from a photographer/artist asking about the 'Blue Lotus of the Nile. He was planning for a future photo exhibit of flowers mentioned in early historical and Biblical writings. 'Blue Lotus of the Nile' features prominently in early writings. After some discussion about the Blue Lotus not being a lotus but a tropical waterlily and referring him to reputable websites to read about the 'lotus,' we agreed that I would search out this waterlily. By early 2005, I had not found a plant to purchase so I agreed to grow *N. 'Caerulea'* from seed. I ordered seeds from the late Ken Landon. Before they arrived, I set up a germination tank (about a 20-gallon watertight container) in the basement and heated the water to a constant 70-75 degrees using a couple small aquarium heaters. Grow lights hung over the tank. Seeds came in mid-February and looked as described, small black poppy seeds.

I added a couple granules of the Landon fertilizer to the bottom of several eight-ounce plastic drinking cups and filled with my usual planting medium, good top soil. I sprinkled the seeds on the soil, carefully watered and waited a day before sifting sand over the seeds and lowering the cups into the water. In 10-days, filiform leaves\* were sprouting and hastate leaves\*\* began to appear about 10-12 days after that. The first floating pad appeared March 11 with more each day. Within a week, I was separating out the best plants and potting them up in four-inch square growing containers.

I repotted two more times. Next into five-inch azalea pots in early May when I moved them outside into a stock tank converted into an outdoor aquatic greenhouse. The final pot upsizing was in early June when I repotted into two-gallon containers and moved them into the water garden. By mid-June, just four months after planting the seeds, the first flower opened followed by many, many more.

Lots of the seeds germinated. I culled out 10 young plants originally and six of those made it into the water garden. Later that summer, I donated three of those to the Marjorie McNelly Conservatory for its new water gardens and I kept three. I overwintered them for several years.

Observations from rereading my jottings in my garden journal – The flowers stand above the water but not as high as the hybrids; the flowers are simple (less petals); and the pads have smooth edges not wavy as seen on today's tropical day-bloomers. I also noted that many of the flowers opened for a fourth day instead of the usual three.

The photographer/artist got his picture of the 'Blue Lotus of the Nile' and developed it into more than a photograph. It is a work of art. He hosted a show of his historic flower photographs a couple years later. And, I had the learning experience of growing a historic waterlily from seed.

In the book *Water Gardens, How to Design, Install, Plant, and Maintain a Home Water Garden* by Jacqueline Heriteau and Charles Thomas, why the words lotus and waterlily are sometimes used interchangeably is explained; "The Egyptians had different words for lotus and water lily, but the Romans, who first brought a knowledge of lotus to Europe, used the same name for both plants and we have inherited the Roman confusion."

*\*filiform leaf – a pointed thread-like leaf, one per seed*

*\*\*hastate leaf – a triangular/arrow-shaped leaf with two spreading lobes at the bottom, one per seed*