

Japanese Sweet Flags



***Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon' (golden Japanese sweet flag) in a container water garden with the marginal *Oryza sativa* (Ornamental Rice 'Black Madras') and small waterlily *Nymphaea* 'Little Sue.'**

The most popular of these cultivars found in garden centers and grown are *A. gramineus* 'Ogon' (golden Japanese sweet flag) and *A. gramineus* 'Variegatus' (variegated Japanese sweet flag). The foliage of 'Ogon' is accented with yellow stripes; 'Variegatus' has white ones. I have grown 'Ogon' and/or 'Variegatus' for many years. Only once did it survive a winter outside and I don't remember which variety. For the first time this past fall, I brought a pot of 'Ogon' in for the winter. It is sitting in a shallow container of water in the laundry room under a grow light and thriving. I should have tried wintering it indoors long ago.

Acorus gramineus is one of two sweet flag species, commonly known as Japanese sweet flag. It is the short one, 6- to 9-inches in height. Its taller relative, *A. calamus*, can grow to 4 feet. Both species have iris-like green foliage and are grown for their foliage rather than the flowers. The popular, widely-grown cultivar of the taller species is *A. calamus* "Variegatus' (variegated sweet flag). This article is about the cultivars of Japanese sweet flag, the appropriately-sized marginal plants for smaller or container water gardens.

Japanese sweet flag looks like tufts of grass, graceful with arching foliage. *Gramineus* means grass in Latin. It is native to China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines and eastern Asia. The common name comes from the sweet citrusy smell released when the foliage is bruised. In medieval times, sweet flag leaves were crushed and scattered on the floor of homes to 'refresh' them.

In Greg Speichert's book, *Encyclopedia of Water Garden Plants*, 10 varieties of Japanese sweet flags are described. Except for a few, the listed cultivars have striped leaves in shades of creamy white or yellow and vary in height from 2- to 18-inches. Japanese sweet flags are said to be cold tolerant, hardy to zone 5 with a few websites claiming to zone 4.

A couple other varieties worth noting are *A. gramineus* 'Oborozuki.' It is shorter than 'Ogon' with yellow-striped foliage. *A. gramineus* 'Pusillus Minimus Aureus,' is a really short variegated variety known as dwarf golden sweet flag. It attains a height of 2- to 4-inches. Years ago, I saw a tiny variegated variety growing in a bog garden next to a small water garden. The homeowner did not know its name as the bog and water gardens came with the home she had recently purchased. I remember it as no more than 4-inches tall and really cute. I don't know if it survived the winter.

The rootstock of the Japanese sweet flag is a small slow-growing rhizome. It is not considered invasive. When it needs dividing, tease apart clumps for re-planting. I grow them in 6-inch azalea pots in good top soil with some clay. I fertilize in the spring whether potting new or just refreshing for another season and again in mid-summer. They grow in full sun to part shade. I have only used these sweet flags in container water gardens with no more than a couple inches of water over the top of the pot. I don't know if they will survive a winter in a bog garden or a moist area in zone 4. Sweet flags are disease, pest and deer resistant.

Most years, 'Ogon' or 'Variegatus' are available at garden centers, not with the water plants but with the short grasses/ground covers or with the collection of foliage plants for use in containers. Several springs ago, they were available early, advertised as accent plants for use in containers with early spring-flowering annuals such as pansies. I tried the suggestion. The Japanese sweet flag and the early annuals were a good combination. In mid-June, I replanted the container with warm-weather flowering plants and potted the sweet flag for use in a container water garden. One plant – two uses.



***Acorus gramineus* 'Variegatus' (variegated Japanese sweet flag)**