

# Plant "Imagination"

*The Chinese Lantern, Physalis alkekengi*



The Chinese Lantern is a herbaceous perennial that bears white flowers. The flowers are insignificant and not the reason for which the plants are grown. The plants are grown for the 2-inch wide papery pods or "calyxes" (calyces) that eventually envelop the flowers. Each of the pods later encases a berry with seeds. In fall, they turn bright orange! These pods are reminiscent of some traditional Chinese lanterns and even more so for their papery texture -- thus the name. Leaves are heart-shaped. Plants are low-growing, reaching at most 2 feet in height. **Zones 3-9**

Grow Chinese lanterns grow best in full sun, but can be grown in partial shade. Grow them in a well-drained soil. When young, plants need to be kept watered and fertilized; once established, the plants become reasonably tolerant of poor soils.

Chinese lantern plants are invasive plants spreading via underground rhizomes. They also are poisonous plants -- a concern if you have children or pets in the yard.

Chinese lantern pods are used in Halloween crafts (due to their orange color) and dried flower arrangements. The color immediately calls to mind the jack-o-lantern popular in the fall. When the pods change their characteristic orange to reddish-orange color, it's time to harvest them. Cut the stems off at ground level to remove them. Strip the leaves off, then suspend the whole plant, upside down, from a nail or string. Dry the harvested pods in dark, cool places with good ventilation for a couple of weeks.