

## Chapter Three - STARTING WITH GLADIOLUS

Your first experience with gladiolus might have been as a child in your parents flower garden at home or at a fair or flower show. In any of these settings, I'm sure your first impression was of the beauty and appeal of this most interesting flower.

As an adult, possibly your first experience with the gladiolus, was the purchase of a few corms from your local garden center or chain store. Most people get their start in this manner. Unfortunately, this is not the best place to get your start. When purchasing from these sources, you are procuring corms that have set on warm store shelves, packed tight in boxes, for weeks. Gladiolus prefer storage of cooler temperatures and good air circulation. If you are to continue purchasing from this source, please buy early in the season, when the corms first show up on the store shelves. Take the corms home and place in an area with good air circulation and cooler temperatures. Check your corms when purchasing to see that they are plump, free of mold and harvesting bruises. At the base, look for the scar where the old corm was removed. New root buds may be starting, which is okay, but long dried roots show that the corms were stored in improper conditions and were starting to grow and died. A sprout on the top of the corm is fine, but don't purchase corms with long curled sprouts. If you are purchasing your corms late in the season, check them carefully. Corms should be solid, not mushy or dehydrated, when you squeeze the husk. Gladiolus corms normally require between sixty-five and one hundred days from planting till blooming time. If you are too far north, ninety or a hundred day glads may not have time to bloom and develop a new corm before frost.

Hopefully your next start with gladiolus will be getting in contact with a gladiolus cataloger, who has the newest and finer cultivars available, plus hundreds of tried and true old standbys. Because of the huge volume of corms sold to retailers, the number of cultivars and colors are limited and new introductions are usually not available. You can get information on Societies listed in the last chapter of this book, and you will soon be in contact with avid growers and catalogers. Catalogers advertise in all of the four quarterly Bulletins published by the North American Gladiolus Council, which you will receive as a yearly member. Information on joining is in chapter 19. You will base the decision as to the cultivars to buy somewhat on the purpose for which you intend them. Are they to be used primarily for viewing where planted, in the cutting garden, for exhibition or for commercial cut flower purposes? Usually the exhibitor will find it necessary to be a bit more extravagant than the person who is thinking of home decoration. He will need a wider list if he is to compete in a majority of the show classes available. He will also be willing to pay the higher prices for show cultivars and recent introductions. As time goes on, and the gardener becomes more interested in the gladiolus, he will probably become a collector of all the outstanding cultivars.

Those who want the gladiolus essentially for use in the home will, naturally, want to keep in mind the colors that will be most appropriate. In such cases it is perfectly

understandable that certain colors will not be wanted at all. This will not be the case with the exhibitor. For instance, his own like or dislike of a color isn't as important as picking a cultivar with show qualities and a past winning history. The same holds true in a limited degree for the commercial cut flower grower. He will select not what he personally approves of, as what the potential purchaser is likely to want, and generally that means a fair variety of colors to satisfy the likes and dislikes of the public. The North American Gladiolus Council Bulletin rates cultivars each year in their symposiums. Many growers throughout the country compile these symposiums and they are a valuable starting tool. Catalogers also publish information on the characteristics of each cultivar offered for sale. The prospective grower should read all society literature, visit the summer gladiolus shows and visit gladiolus gardens. Commercially, gladiolus corms are graded by size. No. 1 – one and a half inch and larger in diameter; No. 2 - one and a quarter to one and a half inch; No. 3 - one to one and a quarter inch; No. 4 – three quarters to one inch; No. 5 - one half to three quarter inch; No. 6 – one half inch and under. This is the listing that will usually be found for wholesale offerings. Many growers, however, list them in their catalogs in only three sizes. They include No. 1 and No. 2 under large. No. 3 and No. 4 under, medium, and No. 5 and No. 6 under small. For all practical purposes this listing is wide enough. We have printed a picture of good quality corms on page 17 to give you a better idea of the sizes you may expect to purchase.

Cultivars differ in their habits so no fixed rules are possible. As a rule, however, we can say that for exhibition bloom, and for maximum growth, the planting of large corm should be used. These have the most food stored in them and will therefore be capable of growing to their maximum the first year planted. On the other hand, if the bloom is to be used primarily for decorative purposes, and there is no particular need for maximum flower size the first year, medium sized corms will do very well. The bloom from these will be nearly as large as that from large corms, though they may lack two or three buds of the maximum. Cultivars grown from medium size corms may take five to ten days longer before coming into bloom. As a rule, the medium size corms can be used for nearly every purpose except that of exhibition. Even here medium corms may answer that purpose, especially with the miniature cultivars. The small size corms will usually bloom the first year, but the bloom will not be characteristic of the cultivar in size. These small size corms are used generally by growers who are interested in getting a start of a cultivar at an economical price. They are willing to wait an extra year before harvesting a full sized flower.

When it comes to the miniature \ small type gladiolus, many growers prefer the small size corm since the aim in the first place is not to get a large spike and bloom but a miniature stature spike and bloom. It is the habit of miniatures to grow almost as well from a small corm as from a large one. What will usually be lacking will be the number of spikes from one bulb, but they will retain their miniature stature.

Cormels are also available in most instances. These are really miniature corms covered with a hard barklike substance and are found attached to the regular or mother corm at digging time. These are always the same as the mother corm and can be used

to increase your stock of a certain mother corm. Though they need special care in growing, they can be purchased more cheaply than regular corms. Used extensively by growers interested in building up large stocks at minimum cost, the process is slower, but comparatively inexpensive. Because of this low cost, many hobbyists purchase cormels in the newer more expensive cultivars.

Another item to look for in purchasing gladiolus stock is the age of the corm, whether it is large or small. Even large corms should not be more than three years of age and preferably not more than two. This means not more than this number of years from the original cormel from which they were grown. Occasionally one will find an exception to this rule, but not often. There are a few cultivars that do best from corms that are quite old, but these are the exceptions, not the rule. Most cultivars begin to retrogress after the corms have reached an age of four or five years, and the gardener interested in keeping his stock at its best will want to replenish it every so often.

The size of the scar on the base of the corm determines corm age. This is the scar left by the removal of the old or last year's corm at cleaning time. An old corm will show a large scar here, and a young one will show only a very small one. Young corms are also usually more high crowned than old ones. Old ones have a tendency to flatten out.

Experience shows that after the first year or two, the gladiolus enthusiast will not be satisfied with a mixture of cultivars but will want to keep them separate and each cultivar named. It is well to have a good supply of labels for this. Many kinds are available and again the grower's own likes and dislikes will determine the choice. The gardener who has a large selection of cultivars to keep separate would do well to consider some plastic labels that are available at reasonable prices. These are used to mark the row and easy to pull and keep with the stock when digging. They can also be placed right in the trays during dipping and storage. Some growers make their own tags from PCV pipe, old Venetian blinds, plastic bottles, etc. Whatever works best for you is fine.

Tools differ very little from those used overall in gardening. For the small grower, hand tools such as a spade, garden rake and a hand weeder will do the trick. Gardening becomes a drudgery when inadequate instruments are used. Especially when it comes to the question of sprayers, quality should be the watch word. All gardening today requires a fair amount of time spent in spraying and dusting if proper preventive measures are taken to control insects and disease. Don't try to get by with something that is inadequate. The average gardener will do best to have a good grade hand sprayer.

With a supply of good corms, tools that are equal to the task at hand, labels for marking the cultivars and a store of high hopes the gladiolus grower is ready for planting. To him who has learned to know the modern gladiolus, the task will be invigorating. It will be a case of high adventure and pure satisfaction when those first blooms start to emerge.

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