

## *Chlorophytum comosum* (C.P. Thunberg) H.A. Jacques

## Spider Plant

(*Anthericum comosum*, *Anthericum mandaianum*, *Chlorophytum beniense*, *Chlorophytum capense*, *Chlorophytum elatum*, *Chlorophytum mandaianum*, *Chlorophytum picturatum*, *Chlorophytum semlikiense*, *Chlorophytum sternbergianum*, *Chlorophytum vittatum*)

**Other Common Names:** Airplane Plant, Hen-And-Chickens, Ribbonplant, Spider-Ivy, Spiderplant, Walking Anthericum.

**Family:** Agaveaceae; also placed by some authorities in the Antheriaceae or Liliaceae.

**Cold Hardiness:** While the foliage is killed by even light frosts, plants are root hardy in USDA zones 9 (8b) to 11, and function as an evergreen herbaceous perennial in USDA zones 10 (9b) to 11.

**Foliage:** Alternate, evergreen, glabrous, linear-lanceolate slightly arching 6" to 12" (18") long by  $\frac{3}{8}$ " to  $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide sword-shaped leaves are keeled at the base; blades have entire to slightly undulate margins with acuminate tips; leaves of most cultivars are streaked with white to creamy yellow variegation, while the species type is green alone.

**Flower:** The small single white flowers are approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$ " across with a whorl of three narrowly ovate white petals in an alternating pattern with a subtending whorl of three white lanceolate sepals; a single pistil is surrounded by six stamens; the flowers are present year-round and subtly attractive, but are sparsely borne on the 6" to 14" long racemes.

**Fruit:** Tiny triangular deeply lobed three-celled leathery capsules with three to five flat black seeds each follow the flowers singly or in small clusters.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — vegetative stems are short and stout with very short internodes, while flower stalks are stiff, wiry, and lightly scabrous; viviparous plantlets form on the terminus of these stalks and produce fleshy aerial rootlets; Buds — tiny green buds are largely encased in the rosette at the base of the plant, or elongate shortly after formation on the wiry arching flower stalks; Bark — not applicable.

**Habit:** Plants arise from tuberous rhizomes to form loose mounds of rosettes 1' to 2' tall and wide which spread to develop dense colonies from the stiff arching wiry stems that bear flowers and plantlets; thick fleshy roots can be so prevalent that plants are difficult to transplant if left too long in a given size container.

**Cultural Requirements:** One of the best attributes of Spider Plant is its ability to grow in a wide range of light conditions; best growth is in a filtered sunny spot, but plants can be kept alive in fairly low light interiorscapes and can be grown in sun or shade spots in the landscape; variegated forms sometimes will scorch in full sun; most any well drained garden soil or potting media will suffice with an acidic to slightly alkaline pH; periodic leaching of salts can help avoid foliar necrosis in areas with salty irrigation water; Spider Plant can be susceptible to damage from excess fluorides in the irrigation water; the fleshy roots help plants tolerate less than perfect watering regimes, but Spider Plant is not particularly drought tolerant in the landscape; Spider Plant requires remarkably little care and can be a lush grower with just a bit of effort.

**Pathological Problems:** Root rots can occur with poor soil drainage or excess irrigation; spider mites, whiteflies, scale and aphids can be occasional problems in greenhouses or conservatories, otherwise few pest or disease problems are reported.

**Ornamental Assets:** The lush growing rich green or variegated foliage tolerates indoor environments and a wide range of light exposures while producing arching wiry stems terminating in small white flowers or small plantlets making it an almost ideal hanging basket plant.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** A lack of cold tolerance in the foliage is its biggest limitation and a tendency to be an aggressive spreader in tropical climates is Spider Plant's primary liability.

**Landscape Utilization:** *Chlorophytum comosum* is found most frequently in interiorscapes, outdoors in hanging baskets, or as a component of a patio pot in much of our region; however, in subtropical and tropical climates Spider Plant can serve as an effective groundcover, edging plant, or bank cover, ala *Liriope spp.* in colder climates; many publications extol Spider Plant's benefits on the interior environment in homes and office buildings.

**Other Comments:** This is one of the most foolproof houseplants available; it is a great plant for beginners as nearly everyone can have success growing it, even in the most inhospitable of homes; sharing new plantlets with friends is one of the best parts about this plant and it is a good conversation starter; the genus name is derived from the Greek word for green, chloros, and leaf, phyllon; the specific epithet means ending with a tuft, prob-

ably in reference to the leaves of plantlets on the inflorescences.

**Native Habitat:** This South African native has naturalized in many tropical regions of the world.

**Related Taxa:** The genus *Chlorophytum* J. Ker-Gawler contains about 250 species of herbaceous perennials which are closely related to the genus *Anthericum* L., also known as Spider Plants, which contains the common European species, *Anthericum liliago* L. known as St. Bernard's Lily; 'Variegatum' with white margins is the most commonly grown cultivar of *L. comosum*, and is probably more available in the trade than the species type; 'Vittatum' has a reverse variegation to 'Variegatum' light creamy yellow flower stalks and is less vigorous than the species type.

**References:** Broschat and Meerow, 1999; Holttum and Enoch, 1991; Loeb and Carpenter, 1992; Riffle, 1998; Watkins and Sheehan, 1975; Whistler, 2000.

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