

Other Common Names: Blue Flax Lily, Tasman Flax Lily, Variegated Flax Lily.

Family: Liliaceae; this genus is also variously placed by different authorities in the Agaveaceae, Phormiaceae or Hemerocallidaceae.

Cold Hardiness: Tasmanian Flax Lily is useful in USDA cold hardiness zones 9 (8) to 11, being evergreen in warmer climates and dying back to the ground in colder regions.

Foliage: Alternate, two-ranked, 1' to 2' (4') long by ¾" to 1" wide stiff, sometimes arching, strap-like leaves are held in flattened fan-like sprays vaguely reminiscent of those on an *Iris* which are tightly compressed at the base; blades sheath each other in a V-shape keel at the base, then splay out and flatten to taper to a narrowly acute to acuminate tip; the revolute margins are finely serrate and sharp to the touch; blades vary in color from green to blue-green and with or without white or yellow vertical variegation.

Flower: Individual small, ½" to ¾" diameter, perfect individual flowers are borne on loose open well branched panicles above the foliage in mid-spring; various authorities report that the panicles can reach 5' in height, but they are much smaller, 1' to 2', than this in our region; the three petals and three sepals are nearly indistinguishable forming six tepals; six prominent yellow to yellow-brown stamens are present.

Fruit: The electric steel blue ½" to ¾" long oblong-ovoid berry-like fruit sometimes are formed in loose panicles in summer above the foliage; individual fruit are olive-shaped with black seeds; fruit can be ornamental, but are not reliably produced on the most popular cultivar 'Variegata' in our region.

Stem / Bark: Stems — tightly held bases of leaves arise in fan-like sprays from short fleshy rhizomes at the base of the plant; Buds — tucked deeply within the rhizomes; Bark — not applicable.

Habit: Herbaceous rhizomatous plants grow 15" to 24" (36") tall and spread slowly to 24" or more in diameter; the strap-like leaves arise in flattened sprays from the rhizomes terminating in spring with flower stalks that are held above the foliage; cane-like stems with shorter leaves on the terminal portions are reported in the literature, but do not appear to be common in the forms found in the Texas nursery trade; the overall texture is medium to mildly coarse.

Cultural Requirements: *Dianella tasmanica* grows readily in our region in most well drained garden soils of moderate fertility or can be grown in container substrates for use in patio containers in regions with colder winters; although plants will tolerate periodic drought, irrigation may be required; plants will grow with a range of soil pH; best growth, particularly of the variegated forms, is sustained in partial shade, however, normal growth can be maintained with adequate availability of moisture in sunnier locations; any damaged foliage should be removed prior to resumption of growth in spring; locations with good air movement minimize chances for foliar pathogens.

Pathological Problems: Mildew and leaf spots are sometimes reported on the foliage, but do not appear to be serious limitations in our regional landscapes.

Ornamental Assets: Handsome variegated forms are more widely grown than the species type and add longer term interest than the seasonally attractive flowers; the fruits can also be showy when produced and are held for an extended time on the plant.

Limitations & Liabilities: Cold tolerance is limited and growth is fairly slow; related species have been reported to be weedy under favorable conditions, but this has not been reported yet on this species in our region.

Landscape Utilization: Tasmanian Flax Lily shows great potential in our region as a source of color for shaded areas and can be used as a groundcover if densely planted; variegated forms supply foliage color in darker corners of the garden; Tasmanian Flax Lily is tough enough for use as a groundcover, but also works in mixed plantings where it is valued for its vertical form; another great use is in patio containers where it works for shady spots and is the best way to incorporate the plant into colder climate landscapes so that it can be moved to a sheltered location for winter protection.

Other Comments: For flowering, this is the showiest of the three species of *Dianella* discussed herein; however *D. caerulea* offers some nice blue-green foliage forms; various authorities list this plant as cold hardy only to USDA zone 9, however, over the past few years I have seen a number of plants thriving in USDA zone 8 or colder, time will tell if this was an abortion or if we have underestimated

their cold tolerance; the popularity of *D. tasmanica* or *D. caerulea* has really taken off with commercial landscapers in the Houston and Beaumont areas in recent years; both species appear to be performing well in College Station over several year; the genus name derives from the diminutive form of the name of the Roman goddess of hunting, Diana, the queen of the woods.

Native Habitat: Southeastern Australia and of course Tasmania to which the specific epithet alludes.

Related Taxa: The Southern Hemispheric genus *Dianella* J. de Lamarck ex A.L. de Jussieu contains between 25 to 52 species of which only a few are used in cultivated landscapes; taxa in this genus are native to moist forests, rainforests or coastal dunes in Australia, Tasmania and associated regions; the primary cultivar in the American nursery trade is 'Variegata' with creamy white margins and vertical strips; it is somewhat less vigorous than the species, but has become very popular for landscapes in the Houston / Beaumont region; it appears to be hardy in USDA cold hardiness zones 8 to 11; it is sold under the name Variegated Flax Lily.

Dianella caerulea J. Sims

Blue Flax Lily

- In its native land, this Australian species is known as Paroo Lily; the 12" to 24" (36") long strap-like leaves of this species can grow in clumps about 3' tall and is reported to eventually spread to 8' or 9' wide, but it is usually much smaller than this in our region; the species can provide an outstanding vertical form with blue-green color for shady locations.
- The 8" to 12" long loose panicles of pendent light blue to purplish blue $\frac{5}{16}$ " diameter flowers and six prominent yellow stamens are striking in spring and are followed by elongated spherical caerulean berry-like fruit.
- Cultural requirements are similar to that of *D. tasmanica*, being useful in USDA cold hardiness zones 8b to 11; the specific epithet is derived from the Latin word "caeruleus" meaning deep blue.

Dianella ensifolia (L.) A.P. de Candolle

New Zealand Flax Lily

(*Dianella nemorosa*, *Dracaena ensifolia*)

- This Asian species is also called New Zealand Lily or Umbrella Dracaena and is a noteworthy weed in some countries, but ornamental selections exist, for example 'Border Silver' (white margins) and 'Border Gold' (yellow-green margins and vertical variegation); generally speaking plants are a bit coarser and larger, potentially to 6' tall, than *D. tasmanica* or *D. caerulea* with less showy $\frac{5}{16}$ " diameter white to pale blue flowers and bluish to blue-black fruit.
- While cultural requirements are similar to *D. tasmanica* or *D. caerulea*, *D. ensifolia* might be useful in slightly colder areas than the other two species with proper provenance selection, given its wider distribution in Asia; the specific epithet translates as sword-shaped leaves.

References: Armitage, 2001; Brickell and Zuk, 1996; Houlttum and Enoch, 1991.