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## Liriope Culture in Georgia

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Liriope, often called border grass, is one of the most useful and versatile ground cover and border plants that can be grown in Georgia. There are several species and cultivars that grow well throughout the state. A similar plant, Ophiopogon, is commonly called mondo or monkey grass. As a group, these plants are often referred to as lilyturf. None of these plants are grasses; instead they are members of the lily family.

An outstanding characteristic of the lilyturfs is that they can survive under a wide range of environmental conditions. They tolerate hot, dry locations better than most shrubs and grasses, and tolerate moist locations better than many ornamentals. They are among the best selections as grass substitutes in areas where there is not enough sunlight to support any kind of grass. Lilyturfs can be established on steep banks or other sites where mowing is impractical. Lilyturfs also offer considerable potential in planter boxes since they are attractive year-round and withstand dry soil conditions. The clumps also do well in patio urns and even as pot plants indoors in a sunny window.

For years, liriope has been used by Georgia homeowners to border foundation plantings and to separate flower and shrubbery borders from the lawn. Once established, liriope forms a barrier to encroaching grasses, preventing them from invading flower and shrubbery plantings.

Today, liriope is being used to beautify the landscape scene in ways other than simple borders. It is being used extensively in mass plantings to produce contrast - especially the variegated types. Solid green leaf types provide an eye-pleasing year-round foliage appearance that is especially welcome during the winter months. All liriope produce lavender flower spikes in mid- to late summer.

More recently, some cultivars of liriope that form attractive clumps have been used as small shrubs. In these cases, clumps are spaced far enough apart (3 to 4 feet) to appear as individual low-growing plants with graceful arching foliage.

## Selections

In Georgia, the most common liriopce species is *Liriope muscari*. It is suitable for both mass plantings and borders. It is usually planted for its foliage effect rather than its light blue flowers, which appear in July and August. It does not spread by underground runners. Instead, each clump enlarges in size each year by forming offshoots. A number of variegated forms are among the most popular ground cover plants. In recent years, a number of *Liriope muscari* cultivars have been introduced that have noteworthy characteristics. Some may be difficult to locate but are worth seeking out. Those available in many Georgia garden centers are:

**“Silvery Sunproof”**: Considered by many nurserymen to be the finest of the variegated liriopes. It has the most white foliage coloration of all the variegated selections. It does equally well in full sun and shade. The leaves appear almost white in full sun, while in densely shaded areas they tend to be more green or yellow-green. It produces lavender flowers in profusion, which are held well above the foliage.

**“Big Blue”**: An improved strain that has broader and longer leaves and larger flower spikes than the common *Liriope muscari*. “Big Blue” is very similar to the variety “Majestic” except that it tends to produce tapered spikes while “Majestic” spikes tend to be wider at the tip and thus are cockscomb in shape.

**“Majestic”**: One of the best and most common of all the improved cultivars. It grows 12 to 15 inches high, producing lavender flower spikes in July and August that stand above the wide, dark green foliage. The spikes are more compact than those of “Big Blue.” As with all liriopce, the flowers are born on longer stems in a shaded environment, and thus the flowers are often more showy in shaded plantings.

**“Lilac Beauty”**: A prolific flowering cultivar that produces clusters of long stiff spikes that are displayed well above the foliage. This is one of the most showy of all of the liriopce varieties when in flower. The green foliage is not as wide as “Big Blue” or “Majestic.” It does well in both sun and shade.

**“Purple Bouquet”**: Produces extra wide, dark green leaves and heavy flower spikes above the foliage. The growth habit is somewhat compact with medium height.

**“Silvery Midge”**: A valuable low, neat border plant, growing to about 8 inches in height. It produces short green leaves with narrow white bands, giving only a slightly variegated effect. It is especially effective when used as a low border for perennial beds. Identifying characteristics include a slight twist to some of the leaves and a varying amount of variegation in the foliage.

**“John Burch”**: A wide leaf foliage cultivar with cockscomb blooms. The flowers stand well above the foliage. The large lavender flower spikes are often showy for several weeks. The variegated foliage bands are narrow: therefore, a strongly variegated effect cannot be expected as with “Silvery Sunproof.”

**“Gold Banded”**: Its most distinctive characteristic is that its foliage arches over gracefully, making a beautiful individual plant. The wide leaves are dark green with a very narrow gold band. The gold band may disappear on plants located in a heavily shaded location. It produces good flower spikes and lavender blooms.

**“Christmas Tree”**: Also called Monroe #2. The distinctive appearance of the flower spikes makes it unique among the liriopes. The spikes, which are light lavender in color, are broad at the base and taper to a point resembling a Christmas tree. “Christmas Tree” plants often do not hold the spikes above the foliage and thus the flowers are less conspicuous than many other cultivars when viewed at a distance.

**“Monroe’s White”**: The only large white flowering liriopce. The long, stiff spikes stand out well above the foliage. This cultivar does best in partial shade. It is slower growing than most lavender flowering types. It is also known as Monroe #1.

## Other Liliaturfs

*Liriope spicata* (creeping liriop): This species generally has foliage intermediate in width between *Liriope muscari* and *Ophiopogon japonicus*. It is easily distinguished by the “grassy” appearance of its foliage that tends to be more yellow-green in color during the winter as compared with *Liriope muscari*. It has inconspicuous pale lavender flowers. *Liriope spicata* spreads by underground runners, making it ideal for use in large ground cover areas. It is useful in covering steep banks due to its habit of spread. According to Fred Galle, former Director of Horticulture at Callaway Gardens, *Liriope spicata* is more drought tolerant and does better under full sun than *Liriope muscari*. *Liriope spicata* is not suited for small plantings in combination with shrubs. The tall foliage gives a “ragged” effect in these situations. In addition, the clumps will spread into the foliage mass of small shrubs, resulting in an unsightly appearance.

*Ophiopogon japonicus*: Commonly called monkey-grass or mondo grass, *Ophiopogon* is a separate genus from liriop. It has a dark green leaf color and finer texture than any of the liriopes. It produces insignificant flowers. The flower spikes are nodding in shape compared to the straight spikes of liriop. The seed are usually hidden by the green foliage and are bright blue in color. *Ophiopogon* spreads by underground runners and thus is more difficult to contain in a narrow border than the clump-forming *Liriope muscari*. It does not respond well to winter foliage pruning as does liriop, but otherwise the culture is identical. It is as shade and drought tolerant as liriop.

## Getting a Start

Individuals frequently obtain lilyturf clumps from friends or divide existing plants in their yard. Older clumps can be divided into 25 or 50 individual plants. If the larger clumps are difficult to separate, cut through the center with a knife or an ax before pulling apart. Take care to obtain roots with each segment.

Liriop is also available in containers from nurseries. These clumps often can be divided into five or six individual plants. When a large number of plants are desired, some individuals purchase container plants, and divide and plant them in a temporary bed for two growing seasons. These are then separated again for the final planting.

## Planting

Although lilyturfs are somewhat tolerant of poor soil conditions, they will be much more attractive and spread faster if planted in a good soil environment. This includes breaking up or rototilling the entire bed to a depth of 6 inches. It may not be practical to rototill to this depth if tree roots are present.

In poor soils, incorporation of 2 to 3 inches of ground pine bark, peat moss or leaf mold is desirable. The addition of organic matter is especially important for compacted soils or where there is considerable tree root competition. Plant no deeper than the plants grew originally. For single divisions, 12 inches between plants is often used for liriop and 6 inches for *Ophiopogon*. This should give satisfactory foliage mass after two growing seasons. In the meantime, a mulch on the soil surface will help control annual weeds and conserve moisture. Pine straw, pine bark nuggets or slightly decomposed leaves are suitable mulching materials. It is best to prepare the soil, mulch the surface and then plant. Liriop can be easily planted through the mulch. In addition to mulch, new plantings of lilyturf need irrigating during dry periods in the first growing season.

Lilyturfs can be planted any time of the year. *Liriope muscari* and its cultivars have one major growth period during the year in the spring months. Therefore, no major additional top growth can be expected when summer plantings are made. *Liriope spicata* and *Ophiopogon* will produce underground runners throughout the growing season and can be expected to continue to grow even if planted during the summer months. A disadvantage of spring plantings of liriop is that many of the tender shoots are broken off in the process of pulling the clump apart. Planting in the fall and early winter allows for root establishment before spring growth.

## **Fertilization**

Homeowners and maintenance personnel often neglect fertilizing lilyturf and thus do not obtain maximum vigor. A broadcast application of a general lawn or shrub fertilizer in early spring and again in mid-summer should be adequate to maintain the desired vigor.

## **Foliage Removal**

Annual removal of liriopae foliage is not a necessity; however, cutting back is desirable if severe winter injury to the foliage has occurred. Running a lawn mower over the plants is a practical means of removal. Hedge shears may be a more practical means for large individual clumps. In Georgia, new growth often begins to emerge in February and March; therefore, prune earlier or plan to cut back high to prevent injury to the new shoots. Ophiopogon redevelops slowly after severe pruning, which is not recommended for this plant.

The dead flower spikes of liriopae cultivars that produce tall spikes become unsightly in the fall and winter. In small plantings it is practical to pull these spikes for a better appearance.

## **Problems**

Very small scale insect attacks liriopae on the undersurface of the leaves, particularly near the crown of the plants. Heavy infestations can reduce vigor. Cutting the foliage back severely during the late winter is the most practical means for the homeowner to control this problem.

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