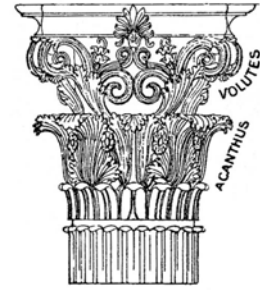




Yard and Garden – 07-04-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Today we celebrate two hundred thirty-three years of independence from Britain. As I ponder such an historical event, I also realize two hundred thirty-three years is relatively short when it comes to the history of civilizations and the origins of certain plants. I'm especially reminded of this as I gaze upon my beautiful blooming *Acanthus spinosus*.

Acanthus is native to northern Greece. *Acanthus spinosus*, as well as its sister plant *Acanthus mollis*, is linked to classical Greece. The large, distinctive leaves of this plant were immortalized in the fifth century B.C. in the design for the capitals of classic Greek Corinthian columns.



Acanthus spinosus, more commonly known as bear's breeches, also found favor with the ancient Romans. Although I have never been there, I've read that if one were to visit the Roman Forum and climb Palatine Hill to view the ruins, one would find growing among the crumbling bricks and shards of travertine marble this remarkable plant.

It arrived in Britain around the 13th century. *Acanthus* plant motifs appear extensively in Renaissance artwork, particularly in sculpture and wood carvings. Thanks to the Brits, it came to America. Today, it is somewhat unknown; however, it was a popular plant grown in Victorian gardens in the 1800's. For these reasons and also for its unique look, I chose to grow this plant in our yard.

According to *Fine Gardening*, acanthus is a vigorous and bold grower with striking foliage and flowers. Dark green oblong to lance-shaped leaves reach to thirty-six inches in length. Flowers are borne on four foot tall racemes with spiny bracts with sepals in combinations of white, green, yellow, pink or purple. Flowers of acanthus are excellent for cutting and drying.

When people ask me about growing perennials, I often repeat, "In the first year after planting, most perennials sleep, in the second year they creep and in the third year they leap." I planted our acanthus three years ago, and I can safely say it is performing as predicted. During its first two years, little growth took place. I was just pleased to see that each



spring it returned. Now, in its third year, our acanthus stands nearly three feet in height with a spread of over two feet. Although not yet fully grown, it is blooming beautifully.

Most publications indicate acanthus to be evergreen and hardy to Zone 6 and higher; however, ours was rated hardy for Zone 5. Our plant dies back in winter and returns from the root crown in the spring. Unfortunately, being hardy to Zone 5 does make it somewhat marginal, but thus far it has performed well.

Cultural care for this plant is similar to that of most perennials for our area. It prefers full sun to part shade. Acanthus grows in most soils, but good drainage is very important. Overwatering is usually fatal. After flowering, the flower stalk should be cut back, leaving only the foliage. The plant can be propagated through seed, root cuttings or divisions. Plants should be divided after three to five blooming seasons in either the spring or fall. Acanthus is said to be deer-tolerant with no serious pest or disease problems. The only negative attribute I read about this plant is that it has eager underground roots which can pop up new sprouts wherever they go. We've yet to see this invasive characteristic.



After two hundred thirty-three years, America continues to celebrate freedom from British rule. However, thanks to the Brits we have acanthus. Like this plant, our country has withstood the test of time; my sincere wish is that it remains strong and free for generations to come. Happy Birthday, USA!

