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## HOME AND GARDEN

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IT'S one thing to pay \$83.5 million for a van Gogh, or even \$18,150 for Madonna's corset (she sang "Express Yourself" in it, in Barcelona) -- but almost \$1,000 for a yellow lily?

Well, not just any yellow lily.

White Flower Farm, that elegant and expensive nursery in Litchfield, Conn., is offering the lily, Clivia Sir John Thouron, for \$950 in its spring catalogue, which will be out soon. There are only about 45 of the plants available, which increases the feeling that of course you must have one.

They are descendants of an unusual yellow clivia native to South Africa that was brought from Britain to Philadelphia in the 1950's by Sir John Thouron, a Scotsman and esteemed plantsman, whose private gardens and four greenhouses, in the Brandywine Valley, constitute one of the finest collections of rare and unusual plants in the country.

No one knows for sure where Sir John got the plant. (Sir John, in his 80's, is very private, and declined to be interviewed.) Even Jock Christie, the superintendent of Sir John's gardens, leaves it a mystery. "I have no idea," he said. "It was here when I came, 31 years ago."

It's a gorgeous plant: big, dark green straplike leaves and sturdy stems that bloom, if you don't give it too much sun, with a ball of buttery yellow flowers in early spring. It looks much like its common cousin, the orange clivia. Only it's yellow, which is rare. And it's Sir John's yellow, which is rarer still.

"It has a pretty flower, but the only reason it's so popular is that it was unavailable," Mr. Christie said. "Sir John only gave it to a few friends."

The lily sends whispers throughout the Philadelphia Flower Show whenever it -- or one of its descendants -- is entered in the amateur competition. And it invariably wins a blue.

"It won first for the whole show when I was a judge eight years ago," said Steven Frowine, the director of horticultural research at White Flower Farm. "Whenever that yellow clivia is brought in, the hush goes around: 'Did you see that yellow lily?' There are very few yellows anywhere, but Sir John's is distinctive."

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It's the plant that inspired the Delaware Center for Horticulture's first rare plant auction, in 1981, shortly after Sir John donated one to the center. (The auction, a sort of Sotheby's to the plant world, raised about \$85,000 last year for community gardens, tree plantings and education.)

That first year, Sir John's yellow clivia sold for \$1,700 -- to MacRae Parker Jr., a New York real estate executive.

"I begged for two weeks to come to that auction," Mr. Parker said. "I had been raising orange clivias for 50 years, but oh, to have a yellow one!"

At first, he was rebuffed, politely. "The lady said, 'Oh, it's our first auction, just a small gathering of members at the Natural History Museum and it's a sit-down dinner,' and all that, but I said: 'But I really want to come. Maybe there'll be a cancellation.' "

He called every day for two weeks. At the eleventh hour, there was a cancellation. And Mr. Parker zoomed down to Wilmington.

"The first person I met was a Mrs. du Pont," Mr. Parker said, unable to remember which Mrs. du Pont. "And I said, 'Do you think I can buy that for \$500?' And she said: 'Not on your life! There are men in Wilmington who'd trade their wives for that plant!' "

The bidding began. Mr. Parker kept his hand up until Sir John's yellow clivia hit \$1,000. When he lowered his hand, a woman leaned over and said, "I thought you came to buy that plant."

Mr. Parker said: "I did! But \$1,000 for a potted plant?"

"Better put your hand back up," she said.

"So I closed my eyes and kept my hand up until it was over," Mr. Parker continued. "And someone said, 'Mr. Parker, thank you for your generous donation.' "

He's never regretted it. "That plant has given me so much pleasure," he said. "I have three huge pots of it now, and when the flower bud rises above these big strap leaves, I'll bet it's waist high. I get 9 or 10 flower heads from three big plants. And they always get \$1,000 or more when I donate one to the auction."

Mr. Parker has reproduced his original lily by planting offshoots, dividing its fleshy roots and even growing them from seed -- and he donates many of these young clivias to the Delaware Center for

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Horticulture. It usually takes about eight years, though, for a seedling to reach bloom size, which is another reason the yellow clivia costs so much.

Mr. Frowine from White Flower Farm, who courts plants the way some men court women, paid two visits to Sir John.

And Mr. Frowine treaded lightly. "When you talk to someone about their treasure," he said, "you try not to be too abrasive. I'd say it was really spectacular, but that of course I wouldn't expect to get it."

Eventually, Mr. Frowine found that the University of Pennsylvania was almost as close to Sir John's heart as his clivias, and he offered to give some profit from a future White Flower sale of the plants for scholarships at the school.

Sir John then agreed to donate some plants to Longwood Gardens, which carefully divided them into about 90 new plants and grew them to bloom size before shipping half to White Flower Farm. Longwood, by the way, named them after Sir John.

"He's the one who's carried the torch for it all these years," said Fred Roberts, the director of Longwood, in Kennett Square, Pa. "And he's been very good in giving plants to Longwood and other institutions and in making his garden available to garden clubs and professional groups. I thought it would be nice to give him some recognition."

Mr. Roberts also wanted to see the plant more widely available. "It's a prize plant that has been in the hands of only a few people," he said.

But this slow grower still has a pretty price. When Mr. Frowine visited a clivia plantation in Japan, seeds were selling for \$150 each (he was given some), and plants for \$850.

As for the \$950 lilies at White Flower Farm, Mr. Frowine is a little worried about a possible deluge of calls before his catalogue is even out.

"I guess we'll have to make some sort of list," he said, "and save some for our regular customers."

Since there are only 45 or so, the limit is one to a customer. And they are too valuable to be shipped. So send your Rolls to pick yours up.

Photos: Steven Frowine surrounded by Sir John Thouron clivias. Inset, two of the flowers. (Steve Miller for The New York Times)