

Aspidistra elatior

[Synonyms : *Aspidistra lurida*, *Aspidistra punctata* var. *albomaculata*, *Plectogyne variegata*]
ASPIDISTRA (English, Swedish) is an evergreen perennial. Native to China and Japan it has (at soil level) rare, inconspicuous, cream to brownish-purple flowers.

It is also known as *Aspidistra vyššia* (Slovak), Bar room plant, Beerplant, Cannon-ball plant, Cast-iron plant, Iron plant, *Kořenohlídka* (Czech), *Kořenokvětka* (Czech), *Metzgerpalme* (German), Parlor palm, *Schusterpalme* (German), and *Tuonenkielo* (Finnish).

It is pollinated by slugs.

Elatior means ‘taller’.

Aspidistra is believed to have been introduced to Europe in 1822.

It was extremely popular in 19th Century Victorian Britain as a houseplant. Here some christened it Cannon-ball plant in recognition of its amazing tolerance whether of neglect, erratic temperatures, continuous shade or dust and smoke. One authority also points out that unlike so many other plants *aspidistra* seemed to be impervious to ethylene gas that was produced then by the indoor town gas lighting – an important quality as it permeated the urban atmosphere as a whole during this period. Another of its names Beerplant arose because bartenders in some public houses often ‘watered’ it with beer dregs – and despite this it clung on to life.

As a houseplant it was still familiar in Britain up to the 1930s and the Second World War. In the music halls it was the subject of a popular song – *The Biggest Aspidistra in the World* – that was one of a large repertoire sung for the British troops and in the munitions factories by their much-loved singer, comedian and music hall entertainer, Gracie Fields (1898-1979).