

Leopard Plant

*A shade-loving perennial that survives
Sahara-like heat*

Jimmy Turner



In my opinion, Texans suffer from a lack of exciting and fun perennials for shade. Many of the shade plants that do well in northern and eastern climates wither and die during our hot summers.

My yard is covered by large oak trees, so I have a personal interest in finding plants that thrive in shade. Ten years ago, I discovered leopard plant while working for a wholesale perennial grower. Here was a shade plant that quickly grew into 2-foot-wide clumps, had attractive, shiny, green foliage with yellow spots, and, in fall, was crowned with 2-inch-wide, golden daisy-like blooms. This tough plant has returned faithfully for me each spring and stands up to the worst of our summer heat.

Ligularia tussilaginea 'Aureomaculata' is called "leopard plant" because the 8-

inch-wide leaves are splattered with bright-yellow dots, resembling a leopard's spotted skin. The variegation is caused by a harmless virus. I have noticed that during periods of high heat, drought-stressed plants lose their variegation. Usually when the weather cools, the "spots" return.

Leopard plant is relatively easy to grow. Place it where it receives bright or dappled shade. The plant will die if positioned in too much sun, so protection from harsh afternoon sun is crucial. Soil should be well-amended with organic matter and evenly moist. This plant is not drought-tolerant — keep it well-watered.

Aside from 'Aureomaculata,' there are two other varieties worth a search. 'Crispata,' or crested leopard plant, has ruffled leaves covered in gray-brown hairs. Some forms of 'Crispata' also have the spotted variegation. Giant leopard

plant, or 'Gigantea,' is my personal favorite. The 3-foot-wide clumps bear 15-inch leaves that look as if they have been waxed and polished. Huge leaves cup under slightly at their edges, making them look like little green umbrellas in the garden.

Leopard plant has not reached the level of worship that hostas have attained. But for our climate, this is a much better shade perennial. Like so many other plants from central China, this plant is well-suited to our hot summers.

Leopard plant is still not commonly available, but plants can sometimes be found at specialty nurseries. Luckily, there are numerous mail-order and internet sources that supply this noteworthy perennial. *

About the author: Jimmy Turner is the Director of Horticulture Research at the Dallas Arboretum and manages the trial gardens there, among other things.



Leopard plant's glossy, green leaves are punctuated with random yellow spots.

AT A GLANCE

Latin name: *Ligularia tussilaginea* 'Aureomaculata'

Common name: Leopard plant

Flowers: 2-inch-wide yellow daisy-like blooms

Foliage: Large, rounded, shiny, deep-green foliage. May be variegated depending on cultivar.

Mature height: 2 feet

Hardiness: Winter-hardy to Zone 7

Soil: Well-drained

Exposure: Bright shade

Water usage: Frequent

Sources: Local retailers, mail-order or Internet suppliers