

ORNAMENTAL PASSION FLOWERS

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The genus *Passiflora* (Tribe *Passiflorae*, Family *Passifloraceae*) comprises more than 560 species of vines, lianas and small trees, providing a remarkable example of plant complexity and diversity. The genus has been subjected to several morphological classifications. In 1938, E.P. Killip subdivided the American species into 22 subgenera, while Feuillet and MacDougal (2004) proposed a new infrageneric classification recognizing only four subgenera: *P.* subg. *Astrophea* (DC.) Mast, *P.* subg. *Deidamioides* (Harms) Killip, *P.* subg. *Decaloba* (DC.) Mast and the widest *P.* subg. *Passiflora* with 252 species. Passion flowers show several unique floral features including multiple series of brightly coloured corona filaments, diverse operculum morphology, a prominent androgynophore (Vecchia, 2009). Flowers are surrounded by coloured sepals and variegated bracts, while the stem and leaves are equipped with pollinators-attracting glands. Most species are widespread in Central and South America, few have been found in Australia and New Zealand and about twenty species live in Asia. The European missionaries recognised the symbols of the Christ Passion in the striking flower and called it “La flor de las cinco llagas” (Vecchia and Giovannini, 2011).



Fig. 1. *P.* ‘La Lucchese’ M. Vecchia hybrid was obtained by crossing *P.* ‘Fata Confetto’ M. Vecchia x *P. kermesina* Link & Otto. The hybrid was cultivated indoor at CRA-FSO to evaluate ornamental characters: trilobated leaves, brightly coloured sepals and petals and a large corona filaments ($\varnothing > 10$ cm).

Since their introduction to the Old World, around 1625, passion flowers have been used to decorate European greenhouses and gardens and the first hybrid for ornamental purpose was obtained in 1819. Passion flower hybrids have a great commercial potential in the international floriculture market for the exotic characteristics of the flowers, the capacity of flowering all year around, together with the abundance of blooms and exuberant foliage (Abreu *et al.*, 2009). Within the project ‘Implementazione del Trattato Internazionale FAO-RGV’, funded by the Italian Ministry for Agriculture, Food and Forest Policies, a collection of 40 *Passiflora* species and hybrids from different geographical regions was established at CRA-FSO, Sanremo North-West Italy. Each accession was classified according to 19 morphological and phenological descriptors for a correct varietal identification. The ornamental value of some beautiful interspecific hybrids of M. Vecchia (Fig.1) was examined.

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