

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Do you check out the kinds of plants other folks are growing in their yards? Do you peek through fences and around arbors to get a glimpse as you walk around the neighborhood? In the late spring and throughout the summer months you may see clusters of bright colored, trumpet shaped flowers on long, straight stems. These are most likely some of the hybrid lilies so popular in Northwest gardens now. Unlike the lilies of our grandmothers' time, which were one color, white, lilies today come in a glorious rainbow of colors from the most intense red to soft petal pinks and peaches. There are no purple or blue lilies yet but hybridizers must certainly be working to remedy that.

There are four main hybrid lily groups; Asiatic lilies, Oriental lilies, trumpet lilies and martagon lilies. The most popular are Asiatic lilies. They are bred from natives of China, Japan and Korea. They offer the widest range of colors and flower types. Their peak season is mid-July and they will bloom until the end of August. Asiatic lilies are good for cut flowers or as potted plants. Some have flowers that face upwards, some that face out, while others have flowers that face downwards resembling wild lilies, which makes them well suited to naturalizing or for use in cottage gardens.

Oriental lilies are derived from a species native to Japan. Their flowers are large and open. Most Oriental types have spotted flowers that are outward facing or hang down pendant-style. The longtime favorite "Stargazer" lily is a member of the Oriental lily family. It has raspberry-red petals with white margins and dark spots. Oriental hybrids bloom over a long period, from July to September. They have a very sweet and spicy fragrance, which can be overwhelming in a closed area.

Trumpet lilies bloom in midsummer. Their flowers can be funnel-shaped, bowl shaped, flat faced, or curled back. These lilies grow to be very tall, 4 to 6 feet, and need to be grouped with good foundation plantings such as peonies. Martagon lily hybrids are bred from species native to Germany, the Caucasus and Czechoslovakia. They are the earliest of the lily hybrids to bloom. They flower over a 2-week period in early summer, producing pendant flowers ranging in color from white to yellow, orange, pink and deep wine. One 5 to 6 foot stalk may produce as many as 40 blooms. Their leaves grow in whorls around the stem, not alternately, as do other hybrid lilies. Matagon lilies need mottled shade and a slightly alkaline soil.

To grow good lilies, plant the bulbs in the fall, if possible. The next best time is early spring. Do not buy bulbs that have been sitting for weeks in plastic wrap. The soil should be loose with a large amount of organic material worked into it. Aim for 50% organic matter. Good drainage is absolutely vital. If your soil tends to be soggy and wet any time of the year, consider planting your bulbs in raised beds or in planters. Most of the varieties do well in a sunny or partially shaded spot. Of all the lilies, the Asiatic is the least fussy about soil texture as long as it is well drained. Plant bulbs 6 to 8 inches apart; the depth depends on the size of the bulb. Multiply the bulb diameter by 3 to determine the planting depth.

Lilies are heavy feeders and need a 5-10-10 or 5-10-15 fertilizer worked in under the bulb. You may also mix in bone meal or super phosphate or a slow time-release fertilizer. Maintaining lilies in future years is simply a matter of keeping weeds away from the plants and keeping the soil moist but not soggy, mulching helps with both of these tasks. Regular feedings, from the beginning of the growing season, is also necessary to maintain healthy, mature plants. Because lilies are so tasty and succulent, they can fall prey to many different four-footed pests. Rabbits, deer, and mice like to dine on them. Lilies grow well in planters and are easier to protect if you have any of these varmint problems.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.