

Discovering Daylilies

By Karen Stephens
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A gorgeous perennial makes a splash

What if you were offered a gorgeous perennial in just about any color of your choice, one that blooms as many as 400 times a season? A plant that requires no staking, is nearly maintenance free and is available in heights from one to five feet? Seem unlikely? Enter the daylily!

Once a simple perennial that came in only orange, yellow, or reddish-yellow, this plant has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis through decades of hybridizing.

Hemerocallis (Greek for “beautiful for a day”) is native to China, Japan and Korea where it is used for medicine and food. European botanical drawings depict daylilies that likely migrated to Europe by the 16th Century. Additional species arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries. By 1900, a dozen species had been identified.

Starting in 1911, botanist Dr. Arlow Stout of the New York Botanical Gardens and “the father of modern daylily breeding in North America,” became absorbed with classifying and breeding daylilies. Today about 20 species are identified along with their many cultivars. Altogether, more than 35,000 cultivars of daylilies are currently registered!

Characteristics: Daylilies are famous for individual blooms that last a single day. However, because their stems (or scapes) average about 15 buds each (many plants have more than one stem), the actual bloom time can last 2-4 weeks.

Hybridization has produced additional varieties that have repeat blooms, as well as prolonging the flowering period. An established daylily clump often yields 200-400 flowers in a season! Daylilies are said to have seven bloom times from “extra early” to “very late.” With careful plant selection, your garden can feature daylilies in bloom from May to October.

Given their variety of heights, colors and forms, daylilies can be used in many ways. The miniature varieties blend well in rock gardens and at the edges of mixed borders. Moderate to taller varieties can also contribute to a perennial border, and their networks of roots can hold soil against erosion on slopes. Daylilies are glorious in large drifts of color.

Nursery catalogs distinguish between “tetraploid” and “diploid” daylilies. These distinctions are probably not important unless you plan to go into breeding. Tetraploids, with 44 chromosomes, are thought to have larger, more intensely colored blossoms on sturdier stems. Diploids, with 22 chromosomes, have smaller but more numerous blooms and are considered by some to be more graceful.



Daylilies can provide vibrant color to your garden. *Photo by Karen Stephens/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Growing Conditions: Daylilies require fertile, well-drained soil along with regular weekly water (during dry spells) for both the vitality of the plant and healthy bloom development. Plants need at least six hours of sun to prosper. However, too much sun can fade the darker blooms while too little can fail to bring out the delicate hues of pastel colors.

Planting and Maintenance: Spring planting is recommended if you want summer blooms. Spring is also the season when more varieties are available.

Place the plant in your prepared hole so the crown (where the stem and roots meet) is one inch below the ground line. Fill the hole with soil and water thoroughly. Supply regular weekly water until the plant is well established.

Daylilies benefit from mulches that not only contribute nutrients but also retain moisture. Feed your plant a yearly shovelful of compost, keeping the dirt away from the crown. This will supply nutrients and build soil tilth.

Alternatively, an application of a complete fertilizer (10-10-10) in the spring should work well. Deadhead spent daylily blossoms to promote future blooms—rather than seed formation.

Propagation: Daylilies are vigorous plants that can be divided every three to five years. August, or early spring, is a suitable time for division and transplanting. August is particularly choice, because plants can become better established during the cool temperate autumn weather and be ready to begin vigorous growth in the spring. Lift the clump out of the soil with a garden fork. Shake off extra soil and pull (or cut) the clump apart into sections that contain both leaves and roots (fans). You are now ready to plant the fans.



A patch of daylilies. Photo by Karen Stephens/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Pests and Diseases: Happily, daylilies are not particularly bothered by diseases even though our Skagit County area can shelter pests such as spider mites, snails, slugs, aphids and leaf streak. Spider mites can be hosed off and snails and slugs can be baited. Consult your Master Gardener Plant Clinic if you need advice about keeping your plants healthy.

Regional Performers: Mary Meyer, PhD, Professor and Extension Horticulturist at the University of Minnesota, cautions that daylilies are regional performers, meaning that certain cultivars are especially suited to some, though not all, geographic areas. Daylilies that flourish in the south may not prosper in northern climes. For that reason, it's important to check your local nurseries and public gardens for cultivars that grow well locally. Luckily, our typically mild Skagit County climate allows us to easily grow a great many lovely daylily cultivars.

RESOURCES:

- Mary H. Meyer. 2016. "Growing Daylilies." University of Minnesota Extension. www.extension.umn.edu
- Karen Russ and Bob Polomski. June, 1999. "Daylily." Home & Garden Information Center, Clemson University. <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/search.html>
- American Hemerocallis Society, www.daylilies.org