

Lilies of the Skagit Valley

By Molly Dight
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A perfect flower for the Pacific Northwest

Ever wonder why more people don't grow lilies here in the Skagit Valley? The fragrance of some of them will knock your socks off! The plants themselves can grow over 9 feet high or as short as 2 feet, and the flowers are spectacular. You don't have to dig them up in the fall. If fed right they produce baby lilies, and if you choose your varieties carefully, you can have them blooming in your garden from June to August.

What is there not to like? The only caveat for our area would be drainage. Lilies need to be planted in well-draining soil, which some of us don't have, but you can always plant them in raised beds, mounds of soil or even containers.

There are many lily species, but the most common ones available for home gardener use are lily hybrids—Asiatic, oriental, trumpet (Aurelian), martagon (wild lilies)—and hybrids of hybrids; orientpet, a cross between trumpets and orientals, and LA's, a longiflorum X asiatic mix). All these species except maybe the wild lilies, are quite easy to grow here in the Valley.

If you want to try your hand with wild lilies, be aware of their specific needs. Do they need a period of drought? Only filtered light? Maybe they need a longer period of cold. They can be fussier than the hybrids whose fussiness has been bred out.

Mix different species of lilies and enjoy blooms all summer long. Begin the season with Asiatic lilies. These come in a multitude of colors (white, pink, yellow, red and orange) in heights from 1 ½ feet to 4 ½ feet and are generally unscented. They are the first to bloom, usually in June. Add some of the LA hybrids, which give you the beautiful colors of the Asiatic with the larger flowers of the Easter lily—plus a soft delightful fragrance. Continue the lily visual feast with trumpet lilies ranging in color from white through pink and yellow. Many have a darker shading on the outside of their petals and generally grow from 3 to 6 feet. Their stems carry multiple flowers, and they are scented.

End your season with the most spectacular of the lily family, the orientals. They'll bloom July to August with big fragrant flowers in shades of white, pink, yellow and red, often with contrasting spots or bands of colors that run up their petals. These lilies are overpoweringly fragrant and depending on the variety, will grow from 3 feet up to 9 feet. The orientpet hybrids can be inserted into your garden as you like. This cross is easy to grow and blooms from June to August.



Left: *Lilium longiflorum*, or trumpet lilies, grow to 4 to 6 inches in height, bloom in midsummer and are incredibly fragrant. **Center:** *Lilium henryi*, which is a native lily of central China, is sometimes called Tiger Lily or Henry's Lily. **Right:** The Oriental hybrid Lily Salmon Star is a common bulb you can purchase at any local hardware or grocery store. *Photos by Molly Dight / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Since there is such a range in color, time of bloom and plant height, be aware of those elements when purchasing lily bulbs. Nine-foot plants need to be carefully placed in an area where they can be supported. They generally have pretty thick stems, but you wouldn't want them in a windy area or growing in front of your living room window.

We have a compatible climate for lily growing: not too hot, just a little damp with a bit of compost, and the soils and pH in our area suit them just fine. In the Pacific Northwest you can plant lilies in light shade, dappled light and full sun. They like cool roots and moisture—not soggy, just damp. Planting depths for lily bulbs vary with the size of the bulb and the variety, but if you're not sure, err on the side of shallow. Lily bulbs are "contractile," which means they'll seek their own depth if planted too high. Bulbs can be planted fall, winter or spring. They don't go dormant, so don't let them linger in your garage or greenhouse too long before planting.

Most lilies are not fussy about soil type or pH for that matter if it's not extreme. (The oriental lilies like slightly acidic.) All species appreciate a good dose of compost in the fall and a light feeding of fertilizer in the spring (like a 5-10-10). Lilies' feeder roots, those roots that take in the nutrients needed by the plant, are found along the stem between the soil surface and the bulb. Compost and fertilizer should be gently added to this area to encourage healthy plants.

Lilies, like many plants, will take two or three years before reaching their mature stature and beauty. Once they reach their adult height they may need staking. Between their extreme height and numerous large flowers, even their sturdy stems can be bent over or broken. Unless growing in an area in which they need extra protection you can probably get away with not staking lilies that are 3 feet or shorter in mature height.

Try growing the 4 -5 feet lilies beneath open branching deciduous shrubs; these offer enough support as the lilies grow up through them. If they are taller than 5 feet, they need to be staked or

grown near trellis or porch supports. Keep them out of the wind; they don't break so much as bend down, especially if you've planted them in a shady spot where they'll reach for the sun.

As your lilies bloom, remove the spent flowers. This will prevent them from putting energy into seed-making. Leave the stem and leaves as long as they're green to gather and store energy in the bulb for next year's floral extravaganza.

In the fall or winter after the plant has died back and is yellow or brown, cut down the old stalks at ground level. In the spring you'll notice the new plants peeking out of the soil; feed and apply slug bait at this time.

Lilies tend to be healthy plants. There is a viral /mosaic disease that can be a problem, but if you buy your bulbs from reliable sources, that should minimize your risk.

Here in the Pacific Northwest you can have problems with *botrytis*, a fungal disease caused by damp weather. (Yes! Damp weather in the Pacific NW!). Avoiding overhead watering and removing damaged leaves and flowers when first noticed will help with this. Rabbits and slugs can harm emerging lilies, so apply slug bait generously around the new growth. Dose them with a good rabbit repellent or plant in containers if needed.

RESOURCES:

- "Selecting Lilies for your Garden." Anne M Hancock & Jane E Bolla. University of Minnesota Extension, reviewed 2009.
- *Western Garden Book*. Lilium. Sunset Publishing Co., 2001.
- "Lovely Lilies for Pacific NW Gardens." Kate Bryant; www.pdxmonthly.com 4/2013.
- "B & D Lilies." www.bdlilies.com 2017. Multiple articles on lily care and growing.



Right: Asiatic lilies can be fragrant and can grow quite tall. **Left:** This is a wild lily, photographed on Sauk Mountain. They can be finicky to grow in a garden. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Note: a hyperlink in this article has been updated since its initial publication.