

The Lazy Gardener's Guide to Growing Daylilies

by Julianne Lebreche

What is there not to love about daylilies?

They're rugged, adaptable, and require little care. They're easy to grow, drought resistant and hardy. They are also stunningly beautiful, available in various shapes and a myriad of colours ranging from vanilla creams and pretty pastels to flaming hot oranges and crimsons. With minimal care, they will survive in a garden for years.

Daylilies are a hardy perennial designed to suit any garden. It should appeal to both novice and experienced gardeners alike.

In a word, they've been described by some gardeners as "perfect" - or, at least, almost. For the lazy gardener, they're a botanical dream come true.

The irony is that daylilies are not true lilies. They belong to the family *Hemerocallis*, a Greek word meaning day ("hemera") and beauty ("kallos"). Nor is it a native plant, contrary to popular misconception. Their origins lie in the Orient where it was used originally for food and medicinal purposes. Written records of the plant go back as far as Confucius, who died in 479 BC.

Each flower of the daylily just lasts a day, hence, the name. Fortunately, each plant provides many flowering stalks, so each clump will bloom for weeks.



Hemerocallis 'Enduring Freedom'

Photo by Julianne Labreche

Designing with Daylilies

Inexperienced gardeners sometimes associate daylilies solely with the old-fashioned, long-stemmed, orange flowered type (*Hemerocallis fulva*) that grows along roadsides and around old and abandoned farmhouses. Given its fast spreading, somewhat invasive nature, this particular type is less than ideal.

Today, there are over 60,000 non-invasive, registered cultivars. They range in price from a few dollars to hundreds of dollars for the newer varieties. Every year, new plants are introduced. There are larger blooms, frillier edges, different colors, appealing eyes and longer, continuous blooming times. Early, mid and late blooming types are available. There are singles, doubles and even spider types.

With so many cultivars, their names are often playful and creative. At The Potting Shed in southern Ontario, commercial grower and hybridizer Jack Kent has been growing daylilies for nearly two decades. His introductions this year include cool names such as "Biker Chick", a glowing purple daylily with a dark eye and citron throat, and "I Wanna Be a Cowboy", an intense yellow with a bold red eye, or centre.

His inspiration comes from different sources- friends, old songs and movies.

He describes his own attraction to the plant as “quite addictive”. “They’re improved so rapidly in the past ten years,” he says.

Adding Daylilies to the Garden

Daylilies can be grown in their own bed, or comfortably mixed with other plants. Their growing needs are modest. They require about six hours of sun during the growing season, and therefore grow best in full sun or part-shade. Daylilies come in different sizes- low, medium and tall. So check the label carefully to ensure it will fit comfortably into an existing bed.

My own preference is not to mix daylilies with other perennials. Their beauty provides a glorious burst of colour in mid-summer, when the garden starts to look tired. That said, my daylilies are inter-planted with spring bulbs, tulips, daffodils and crocus, which will bloom when they are growing.

While they can be planted anytime during the summer; daylilies are probably best planted in spring to give the roots time to get well established. Dig a hole about twice the size of the root mass. Make a small mound in the center of the hole and set the plant in place with the roots spread on and around the mound. The crown should be at ground level.

New plants are best planted about as deep as they originally grew. Work the soil around the plant, then firm the soil and water well. Until they get established, they will benefit from regular watering.

Plants that arrive ‘bare rooted’, which is usual when they’ve arrived by mail, should be planted immediately.

Daylilies are easily divided in spring, simply by digging up the plant, carefully splitting it and replanting.

Care and Maintenance

Daylilies are easy to grow and require little maintenance. They are often described as drought-tolerant, but do benefit from extra water, especially during dry periods.

“They do love water,” says Jack Kent. “If you extend the same tender loving care to them as you extend to your other plants, it will totally make a difference.”

Kent adds that daylilies benefit too from compost and mulch. The latter will reduce the need for weeding, and help to hold the moisture.

In my own garden, I remove the spent flowers daily while the plants are in bloom. This not only improves the look of the plant during its peak time, but prevents spent blooms from interfering with new flowers. It also provides the pleasure of touring the daylily garden daily to view the current day’s blooms. With daylilies, each day is different.

When the flower stalks are finished blooming, they are cut back. If I add fertilizer, it’s in early spring when the plants are still growing.

As for winter protection, it really depends on your zone and climate. After any hard frost, the plant will die back. It may be beneficial to leave the dead foliage as winter protection to prevent ongoing freezing and thawing. Conversely, some gardeners like to trim off dead foliage in fall to reduce the risk of damage from mice and insects. Trimming in fall also means less mess come spring.

Pests and Diseases

Fortunately, daylilies are tough plants; they're hard to kill. Total neglect, poor soil conditions and lack of sunlight can be risks to their longevity. In the southern United States, in zones 7 and 8, there is the risk of daylily rust. For serious hybridizers and commercial growers, this is often dealt with using chemical sprays.

In more northern climates, this rust tends not to overwinter and therefore poses minimal risk.

As with other perennial plants, spider mites and thrips- miniscule insects- can sometimes get into the buds. Good garden hygiene, including deadheading when necessary, will eliminate these pests.

The biggest danger for the gardener with these healthy, hardy plants is simply being lax and complacent.

Older, existing daylilies can become, well, a little boring and predictable. Be willing to get part with them.

Consider splitting daylilies in spring and hold a neighbourhood plant sale. It's a good way to get rid of old ones, and use the profits to add some new ones instead.



Hemerocallis 'Gladys Campbell'



Hemerocallis 'Destined to See'

Photos by Julianne Labreche

By Julianne Labreche, Master Gardener