

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Daylilies are versatile, colorful additions to any garden

By Jim May

Daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.) are dependable, easy-care perennials. They are prolific and colorful bloomers, and their color range and height variation allows them to fill a variety of garden niches. Used for color in shrub borders and perennial beds, daylilies are pest-resistant, tolerant of drought and flooding, immune to heat stress and grow well in full sun or light shade.

Different varieties of daylilies can be in bloom from late spring until autumn. Individual flowers last only one day, but there can be as many as 30 flowers to a scape (stem), and as many as 12 scapes on a single plant. This extends the bloom time for many weeks. Many varieties are fragrant and some have more than one flowering period.

Daylilies are excellent ground covers on slopes. Once established, their roots will help prevent erosion. They grow very thickly and will choke out many weeds. Daylilies may bloom the year that they are planted, even from a relatively small plant.

They range in height from 8 inches to 5 feet, with many new dwarf varieties available. One of the most popular is 'Stella D'Oro', used widely by homeowners, commercial establishments and even highway departments.

Flower size ranges from as small as 2 inches to as large as 8 inches. They grow best in direct sun or light shade. Cultivars with darker-colored flowers should be protected from strong afternoon sun, which may fade the petals. They prefer slightly acidic (pH 6 to 6.5), well-drained soil with plenty of organic matter but will tolerate most soils.

The variety seen commonly in this part of the U.S. is *Hemerocallis fulva*, or the tawny daylily. This sterile form produces no seedpods and is spread just by its roots. It has spread so widely it has established itself as a wildflower and is commonly seen along roadsides and around old homes. One common name for it is the "outhouse lily" because it is seen around old privy sites in rural areas.

The best time to plant daylilies is during the early fall or spring, when soil temperatures are moderate although daylilies will tolerate planting any time of year. Plant full-size daylilies 18 to 24 inches apart, with the mini varieties only 8 to 12 inches apart. Set the plant so that the crown (the point where roots and foliage meet) is no deeper than 1 inch below the surface of the soil. Water plants thoroughly after planting, and continue to deep-soak them weekly until established. Remember when planning your daylily bed that the flowers turn toward the sun. To get the full effect they should be viewed from the south where you will see their bright faces, not their backs.

Light fertilization with a slow-release fertilizer is recommended for optimum growth. They prefer moderate nitrogen and higher rates of phosphorous and potash. Fertilize in the early spring as new growth appears, and once again in midsummer. Mulch helps to conserve moisture in the soil and

control weeds. Broadcast fertilizer over the lily bed in late fall after a hard frost has knocked back the leaves and then apply a layer of protective mulch.

Daylilies rapidly form dense clumps. Dividing the clumps of old varieties is not essential, but modern hybrids should be divided every 3 to 5 years. Dividing is usually done following flowering, but plants will tolerate division throughout the entire growing season. To divide a clump, lift the entire clump out of the soil with a shovel or garden fork. To separate the clump into individual fans (sections with a set of roots and leaves), shake it to remove as much soil as possible, and then work the roots of individual fans apart.

If you want to grow them from seeds, harvest when pods turn brown and start to split open. Plant freshly harvested seeds in pots or flats in a commercially available soilless mixture. Cover the seeds to a depth of 1/8 to 1/4 inch. Seeds germinate in approximately two weeks. Seedlings should be transplanted to flats or pots when they reach 4 inches in height and can be planted in the garden the following spring. It usually requires two years for plants to develop and flower from seeds.

Daylilies have few disease or pest problems. Thrips, spider mites, aphids, slugs and snails are the main pests to look out for. There are several sprays available for the control of these pests. Read labels carefully before applying any pesticide.

Breeders have made great improvements in daylilies and hundreds of new hybrids are introduced each year. The only colors originally available were yellow, orange and a brassy reddish color. The daylily color range now includes pale lemon, bright yellow and gold, orange, scarlet, maroon, wine-reds, pale pink, rose, lavender, lilac, grape and melon. Blues and pure white are the only colors that still elude hybridizers.

For more information on gardening in Virginia, visit the Green Industry Council's Web site at www.viriniagardening.com.