

# Using Daylilies in the Landscape

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## Introduction

Twenty-five years ago any article promoting the use of daylilies had first to define its subject from the ground up. Widespread confusion with "true lilies" (*Lilium*) led to the assumption that daylilies (*Hemerocallis*) sprang from bulbs. Even the efforts in 1923 of the American Joint Committee on Horticultural Nomenclature to distinguish the plants by combining the common name day lily into its present form "daylily" were slow to be accepted. Dictionaries still carried the old spelling and early computer spell checkers routinely flagged the combined form. Today, newspapers usually get it right and most gardeners have firsthand knowledge of a daylily's roots or rhizomes.



The American Hemerocallis Society and its 11,000 plus members have done a lot toward spreading the word about daylilies. Within that group exists a core of hybridizers who have made the daylily what it is today—a versatile garden plant with incredibly varied blooms. A confusing array of more than 40,000 daylily cultivars have been registered. Many of them are stunning. But when it comes to landscaping, some do and some don't. Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this article to sort out relative performances. They do vary according to climate and soil conditions. And, yes, there are a few poor performers not worthy of appearing on any stage.

Daylilies have long been reputed to require little or no care. If a carefree plant is the only requirement, one can't do better than the rhizomatous *Hemerocallis fulva* that covers roadside banks in early summer. Of course it will overrun the garden in no time flat. For beautiful blooms and more genteel behavior, the newer hybrids are a better choice.

Daylilies are similar to many other perennials in their cultural requirements. To look their best they must have plenty of water. A loose, friable soil will help to retain moisture and promote growth. A few daylily cultivars are so susceptible to insects and disease that they should be avoided altogether. It is possible to eliminate the problems with sprays, but gardeners are rightly demanding more resistant plants as opposed to stronger chemicals. *Hemerocallis* collectors sometimes go to great lengths to grow a weak or climatically unsuited plant, but landscapers require a degree of self-sufficiency in plant material.

One of the great assets of daylilies is the bloom season. It is easy to find bulbs and perennials for a colorful early spring garden. Late spring brings the iris. Early summer features roses. But daylilies bloom at the height of summer when plant choices narrow. Most plants bloom for about three weeks. Some, especially in the south, rebloom. A collection of early and late-blooming cultivars may extend the season for several weeks on either side of peak. At this writing, there is no such thing as an everblooming

daylily. The small yellow, widely marketed STELLA DE ORO (Jablonski) has been promoted as an everbloomer. The same goes for some of its even more widely distributed relatives. While STELLA DE ORO does have a long bloom season and many other admirable qualities, it was never an everbloomer. Interestingly enough, its trait of fast multiplication worked against its long bloom season. Growers soon found that it needed to be divided regularly to prevent its "going to grass" which led to diminished bloom. But the rapid multiplication and fine short foliage makes it useful as an edging plant. It is also a plant eminently suited to cold climates.

## **Arrangement of daylilies in the landscape is a very personal matter, but some author-biased principles will be set forth here.**

### **1. Most daylilies, even large collections, look better intermingled with other plants.**

Since the *Hemerocallis* offers nothing approaching true blue, other plants can supply the missing color range. Also, daylilies with all their myriad shapes still lack a spiral form. So a blue spire is ideal. In locations where they can be grown, delphiniums make a striking combination with daylilies. Blue morning glories are not spiral in flower, but their climbing habit qualifies as vertical. They were a striking complement in a recent Louisiana daylily convention. The same gardens used masses of blue hydrangeas against the warmer colors of daylilies. Lythrum is an easy answer to the missing spire and its hot pink shades are especially pleasing, though the white and purple shades are also good choices. *Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' is not distinctive from daylilies in color, but it makes an attractive contrast for daylilies by virtue of its airy, ferny foliage. Since both daylilies and Shasta daisies like water, the two mix well. The very white daisies are whiter than any of the near-white daylilies produced to date. Sometimes the unexpected addition of a spicy Oriental *Lilium* will set garden visitors on a search for that extraordinarily fragrant daylily. But in truth, only a few daylilies have a really permeating aroma.

Finally, one of the most effective companions for daylilies is a good green mass of living color. It may take the form of evergreen shrubs in the backgrounds or a flat expanse of grass in the foreground, but it is the very backbone of an effective display.

### **2. Landscape bloom consisting of mostly daylilies should be planned with contrast and harmony in mind.**

A beautiful daylily garden *can* result from a random mixing of cultivars. Many collectors have just that—not by design but by the continuing force of nature which requires them to dig out the old and replace it with a newer acquisition. Every planting spot is already filled, so the gardener removes the most expendable plant. Perhaps the new plant will blend as well as the old; perhaps it won't.

Most daylilies will not clash too badly with one another, but they often look better with just a little planning. It is difficult to visualize all the neighbors in a crowded garden in the normal planting time of spring or fall, but in bloom season the gardener should study the garden, make note of any jarring effects, and adjust the arrangement in late summer or early fall. Actually, one can move daylilies around the garden in full bloom, rather like rearranging the living room furniture, to get a more accurate picture, but this method has the disadvantage of causing stress to the plant. Unless the roots are taken intact with a ball of dirt, the plants really should be cut back by half after being disturbed.

Daylilies with astonishing color blends, prominent eyes, and extravagant edges in gold and burgundy are very popular now, but they look better separated by spacers of single-color blooms (called selfs) in more muted colors. The so-called near whites and pale yellows are excellent for this purpose. Alternatively, edging colors might be picked up and repeated by a solid-color daylily.

Monochromatic color schemes with daylilies are effective in mass plantings. Examples can be found around public buildings or in parks and arboretums. A sweep of daylilies may contain many shades of pink, ranging from very pale to dark rose. Another plan may utilize only shades of yellow, ranging from pale cream to orange gold. The ultimate monochromatic scheme uses all of one variety in a mass planting.

Colors are not the only possibility for contrast in an all-daylily garden. Forms have surely reached the pinnacle of diversity. No longer do daylily aficionados disparage every bloom that is not round and ruffled. The Spider and Spider-Variant forms have been "hot" for several seasons and now we have a new Unusual Form classification which includes other strange and wondrous shapes. Doubles have become fuller and more consistent. An effective garden arrangement mixes the round and ruffled daylilies with and other forms for emphasis by contrast.

Planning for height may be important, but it can be a frustrating effort. The *Hemerocallis Check Lists* and most price lists do record height, but it can vary as much as a foot in different parts of the country and from year to year. A daylily is usually shorter during the first growing season. Left undisturbed, it may attain its "typical" height the second or third year. But the same variety planted at the same time in California and Pittsburgh could look like two different plants, especially in height, but sometimes, to a lesser degree, in color and form. One must be adaptable to be a happy gardener.

### **3. If hardy, daylilies will survive in almost any location out-of-doors.**

True, but they will not necessarily thrive. The first requirement is a plant suited to the climate. Much has been written about the hardiness factor in daylily foliage. At one time the lines were fairly well drawn. Evergreens did well in the south, and dormants were for the north. However, with the tumultuous advances of cross breeding, all the rules have changed. The resulting semi-evergreens (and this result is by no means a given) were supposed to thrive everywhere. Some do and some don't. The same may be said for dormants and evergreens. Each case must be taken separately.

Sun exposure is less complicated, but it too has its caveats. The general statement that daylilies require at least a half-day of sunlight is not far off target. Some daylilies hold up to extreme heat very well and bloom best in full sun. But dark colors too often fade, slick, or melt in full sun. This generalization has exceptions but it is mentioned here as a starting guide to placement.

#### **4. Successful garden design is not transferable.**

It is difficult to make specific suggestions on garden design, for the problems and solutions are highly individual. A daylily garden is no different from any other garden in that the final object is pleasing the eye of the beholder. The same principles apply.

On the other hand, selecting and growing daylilies is much more plant specific and the subject is too big to cover in this space. The American Hemerocallis Society has a booklet, *The Illustrated Guide to Daylilies* which packs a great deal of information and many color pictures into 112 pages. It can be ordered on the AHS website for \$10.

Readers who have access to the internet will find several sites relating to daylilies. The American Hemerocallis Society's web site is [www.daylilies.org](http://www.daylilies.org).

A visit to your friendly neighborhood bookstore should find several independently published books about daylilies on the shelves. This in itself marks a great change in awareness of the daylily since twenty-five years ago.

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