

## **Out of the ditch and into the garden**

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If you think daylilies only come in that rusty colour you see in ditches, think again! The daylily has come a long way since 17<sup>th</sup> century plant hunters found it growing wild in Eastern Asia. Most of those advances have happened in the last 50 years.

Whether you like flowers with vibrant eye-catching colours like scarlet and orange, deep jewel tones like purple and burgundy, or delicate pastels like pink and cream, there are many daylilies that will suit you. The blossoms may be large or small, round or triangular trumpets or unusual forms with narrow curling petals. The petal edges can be smooth or ruffled or fringed. So many choices!

Early researchers discovered that individual plants within a wild population varied little and their offspring "came true from seed". But there were sufficient differences from population to population to make them distinguishable - to use the scientific term, each stable breeding population is a species.

There are about 20 daylily species recognized today. They vary in characteristics such as the height and branching of the scapes (the leafless bud-bearing stalks), flower size or time of bloom. Some have foliage which remains green year-round while others die back to the ground at the end of the bloom cycle. Most have single flowers with three petals and three sepals, but at least one species has double flowers. Some are fragrant. The colour range is limited - yellow, orange and the familiar rusty colour - but some have a small darker coloured eye zone.

So where do pink and purple daylilies come from, if all the species are yellow or orange?

### **Hybrids**

When a cross is made between species, the results are not predictable. Hybridizers soon saw interesting variations and realized that daylily species have a great deal of variability hidden in their genes. Reds, pinks and purples turned up quickly.

A major event in daylily breeding happened in the late 1940s when chemical treatments altered cell division and produced daylilies with extra chromosomes. The natural order is for plant cells to be diploid - have 2 sets of chromosomes. Tetraploid plants have 4 sets. By 1961, breeders had shown that these "tet" daylilies could be fertile when crossed with other tets. The extra genetic material introduced even greater variability into new hybrids.

### **Registered Cultivars**

When early breeders produced a hybrid that they thought was particularly fine, they divided it repeatedly over a period of years until there were several clumps of it - all identical. When they had enough, they gave it a name and began to sell it.

In 1946, when the American Hemerocallis Society (AHS) was formed, it was given the sole right to register daylily cultivars world-wide, a task it still holds. Today there are more than 68,000 cultivars registered - about 40,000 dips and 28,000 tets - and this number is increasing by about 2,500 per year. All of these hybrids have species plants somewhere in their lineage, perhaps hundreds of generations back.

There are many people actively hybridizing daylilies today, including several here in Ontario. Most have specific characteristics that they are seeking - such as more ruffled or toothy edges, contrasting eyezones, or the daylily colour grails of pure white or true blue blossoms. All seedlings are evaluated and the best specimens are tagged for further evaluation and possible future registration and introduction. Breeders are looking not only for pretty faces, but good growth habit, high bud count on branching scapes and disease resistance.

### **Beautiful and easy!**

Daylilies are not only beautiful but they truly are low maintenance perennials. They prefer sun and moist soil but will tolerate some shade and dry conditions. Fertilizer will boost performance but is not really essential. They have no significant pests in this climate. You can cut down the foliage in the fall, but if you leave it until spring it will be easier - no shears needed - it can be gathered up by hand. And birds use it for nest building.

All you really have to do with a daylily is admire and enjoy it!! Mine draw me out into the garden every morning to see what's in bloom - it's a different picture every day because each blossom lasts just 24 hours. This is why the botanical name chosen was Hemerocallis - derived from Greek words for "beauty" and "day". But an established clump with many scapes will provide colour for several weeks as the buds bloom a few at a time. Daylilies are useful too - their graceful mounding leaves provide perfect camouflage for the unsightly but necessary-to-keep fading foliage of spring bulbs.

### **Get some!**

Not all registered daylilies are available in the marketplace today and some are too tender for our northern climate. But there are many nurseries in Ontario and Quebec with hardy field-grown daylilies and many of them will ship bare root plants. An internet search for northern daylily sellers will give you several websites to check out. The catalogue listings include pictures and details such as size, height and time of bloom. In this climate, early plants will bloom in mid-June and late bloomers will start around mid-August. Peak bloom is mid- to late July.

This is a great way to spend a March or April day - shopping for new daylilies! Supplies can be limited so it is best to order early - they will be shipped later, when it is time to plant. And when your local nursery opens, check their stock too. Get some of these beauties for your garden!!

## Sidebar

### Be a backyard hybridizer – breed your own daylilies

If you have several seeds from a single cross, it will be fun to see how these siblings or “sibs” differ from each other and their parents.

Pick the father (pollen parent) and pull off a stamen (there are usually 6) that is fluffy with pollen. Dab pollen on the end of the pistil of the mother (pod parent).



Hang a tag on the pollinated blossom so you won't deadhead it. Record the names of the parents if you know them. If the pollination took, you will see a pod swelling at the base of the faded blossom a couple of days later. It will take several weeks to mature.



Harvest the seeds when the pod splits and starts turning brown. Let the seeds air dry for a few days and then store dry in a small envelope – one envelope for each cross - in a cool place or the fridge.



Here is one method to germinate the seeds indoors:

Around February 1, put some vermiculite in a baggie, moisten it, mix in the seeds from a cross, seal and store in the fridge for about a month.

Bring the baggies out into room temperature. Check them every day over the next month – as seeds germinate, carefully pick them out and plant in a 6cm pot in potting mix. Give the seedlings lots of light. They can be hardened off and planted out in the garden around the end of May.

Have patience – it will be at least another year, possibly two before the seedlings reach blooming size.



**Maple Leaf Forever (Ontario bred)**



**Blossom Music (Ontario bred)**



**I Dream in Green (Ontario bred)**



**Giggle Creek (Ontario bred)**



**Silent Heart (Ontario bred)**



**Walking Across Egypt - an unusual form - bred in upstate New York**



**Jade Princess (Ontario bred)**