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Daylilies

by Michelle Le Strange, Master Gardener Advisor

The daylily's increasing popularity in California gardens is with good reason. Daylilies come in a rainbow of colors, have a long season of bloom, are virtually pest-free, heat and drought tolerant, adaptable to most soils, and grow in either sun or partial shade. Above all this versatile plant produces showy flowers providing immense satisfaction to the gardener.

Daylilies are not true lilies, but it's true that their flowers rarely last longer than 24 hours after opening. The good news is that each flower stalk (properly called a spath) consists of several blooms and each plant generates many spaths per season, so the colorful beauty of the daylily is not as fleeting as it sounds.

The typical daylily plant is described as fans of upright, strappy leaves arising from clusters of thickened roots with lily-like flowers born on leafless branched stems that rise above the foliage in late spring to early summer. For hundreds of years the color palette of daylilies was limited to yellows, oranges, and russet shades despite more than 15 species in the Hemerocallis genus. Classics are the lemon lily (H. lilioasphodelus) with a distinctive lemon aroma and the common orange daylily (H. fulva 'Europa').

Over centuries plant breeders transformed the daylily's appearance: changing flower color, shape, size and plant habit. In the 1980s came the 'tetraploid revolution' which produced plants with double the number of chromosomes adding more vigor and further improvement of daylily characteristics. Blooms are larger and more intensely colored, flower stalks are sturdier, and both flower and foliage have more substance. These changes made the daylily more reliable in different climates and more desirable to gardeners. Today, the hub of breeding activity is in the United States, where thousands of enthusiasts collect hybrid daylilies with a passion comparable to tulipmania.

Modern creations offer choices for just about any color scheme. Clear shades of white, apricot, pink, red, lilac and purple, and exotic colors such as grey, black, brown, green and blue are being bred in some varieties along with traditional shades. Today's daylilies come in several color patterns, some are solid color, two-tone, have midrib stripes that yield a bicolor effect, or posses an interesting eyezone (a band of color where both petals and sepals meet the flower's throat).

Many modern flowers are rounder and flatter than the old 'trumpet lily' and delicately ruffled and scalloped edges are now taken for granted. Some have broad petals, but there are also the narrow spidery ones. Also varieties can be sprinkled with tiny iridescent dots known as diamond dust.

Long blooming 'Stella de Oro' has been called America's most popular hybrid yellow daylily.

Newer hybrids with sharply contrasting eyes offer more visual stimulation. Conjure up 'Pirate's Patch' with cream petals and a large black plum eyezone, 'Renegade Lady' with yellow gold petals and a red eyezone, or "Navajo Princess" with pale pink petals and a bold rose eyezone and you'll understand what I mean.

Another layer of sophistication introduced to the daylily flower was the picotee. Petals of these hybrids are edged with a darker color, sort of like a delicate trim. Examples include 'Daring Dilemma' pale peach petals with bold plum eye and purple wire picotee and 'El Dorado' with its striking pale yellow petals, maroon eye and picotee edge.

The spider daylilies are another intriguing development. Long and narrow floral parts, which twist or curl impart great elegance to the flowers. Many spider daylilies have flowers over six inches in diameter.

Daylilies can be transplanted anytime from spring through fall, even while in bloom. Old, congested clumps are rapidly rejuvenated by weeding out dead material and splitting in early spring. Daylilies blend into natural and formal landscape designs. They can be used in borders and perennial beds, massed on banks, used with evergreens near pools, or along driveways in the countryside. All make good cut flowers adding to the versatility of the popular daylily.

June 15, 2006