

## The Almost Perfect Perennial

By Susan Camp

When Jim and I bought our house and land in Gloucester 21 years ago, we gained a large daylily garden in the middle of a field. We soon found you can have too many of these almost perfect perennials.

Introduced from Asia as an ornamental in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the daylily thrived everywhere it was planted. The original tawny, or orange, daylily (*Hemerocallis fulva*) escaped from cultivation and colonized old home sites, ditches, meadows, and undeveloped or disturbed land. Several states list the tawny daylily as an invasive, according to the Invasive Plant Atlas of the United States. Thick, tuberous roots form heavy mats that are difficult to remove. The original species has a number of colloquial names, including tiger, ditch, and backhouse lily, because it was often planted near the farmhouse privy.

Today, more than 40,000 species of hybridized *Hemerocallis* exist. Once considered members of the lily family, daylilies are now placed in the family Hemerocallidaceae. Daylilies are easy to grow and require little care, but will reward the gardener with lush greenery and a long blooming season if they are offered the least amount of attention. Flower colors range from palest cream through every shade of yellow, melon, orange, red, pink, and purple. There are even “diamond dust” cultivars, with glittering specks on the petals. The only colors missing are pure white and true blue. Tetraploid varieties, with four sets of chromosomes, are popular for their larger, fleshier flowers, lush leaves, and sturdy scapes (flower stalks). The America *Hemerocallis* Society website section “Daylilies— Frequently Asked Questions” provides extensive information for the home gardener.

Daylilies like six hours of full sun, but will bloom in light shade in USDA Hardiness Zones 3-9. In full shade, blossoms will be sparse and leaves and scapes weak and leggy. Slightly acidic soil (pH 6 to 6.5) with good drainage is best. Daylilies will tolerate sporadic watering and drought, but will produce better flowers if kept evenly moist. They rarely need fertilizing, and excess added nitrogen will reduce flowering and cause scapes to break easily. Mulching is not necessary, but will help soil retain moisture and reduce weed growth.

Propagate daylilies by division every three to five years, every two to three years for reblooming cultivars. Lift each plant with a spading fork and wash or remove soil by hand, discarding dry or damaged tubers (roots). Cut leaves back halfway and place the separated plant in a hole deep enough to hold the roots and contain the crown one inch below the soil surface. Work soil around the tubers and water well. Daylilies are generally divided between April and September, but I have successfully divided them in mid-winter.

Few insect pests attack daylilies, although aphids, slugs, thrips, and spider mites can pose occasional problems. *Puccinia hemerocallidis*, a fungus that causes daylily rust, is the only

major disease. Fungi that cause plant rusts require an alternate host; for daylily rust, the alternate host is golden valerian (*Patrinia* sp.), so the two plants should not be grown in the same area. This is not a problem for me. Valerian is a pretty plant, but the leaves, roots, and tea brewed from it smell like wet sweat socks. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-030 “Daylilies in Virginia” provides information on cultural requirements, propagation, and daylily rust management, including a list of cultivars that have resistance to the fungus. Deer like to eat young daylily buds and leaves, but we have had success with a combination of citrus-scented soaps and a nasty smelling, non-toxic spray.

The biggest problem with daylilies is that they are so prolific. At some point in time, you may run out of friends to take them off your hands. On the other hand, when they bloom, it looks like an entire 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration erupted in your garden.

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