



Designing with Daylilies

BY DANIEL MOUNT

Daylilies are one of the most common garden perennials, but using them effectively in design requires strategic placement.

Daylilies such as 'Grey Witch', foreground, and red-and-yellow-flowered 'Abaachee', center right, stand out in the Northwest Perennial Alliance's display border in Seattle.

DAYLILIES (*Hemerocallis* spp.) are one of the most commonly used perennials in American gardens. Yet, as a landscape designer and a gardener myself, I have come to the realization that daylilies are not always used effectively in garden design. This prompted me to take a closer look at why “the perfect perennial”—as authors Lewis and Nancy Hill dubbed daylilies in the title of their seminal 1991 book—can be difficult to work into a landscape, and to offer some advice on how, with proper

placement and a few cultural shortcuts, some of their perceived shortcomings can be turned into positives.

So why are daylilies difficult to design with? Well, for starters, more than 52,000 daylily cultivars are registered, and although only a fraction of those are readily available, I believe this bewildering plethora of choices may be partly to blame. Another challenge is their habit of dropping their foliage when they begin flowering, which can leave you with a bunch of bare stems in late summer. And in temperate



Left: Daylilies such as ‘Barnegat Light’, whose flowers bloom aloft on tall scapes, are suitable for the interior of mixed borders. Above: A few daylilies, such as ‘Malja’, foreground, and ‘Kwanso’, background, have variegated foliage worth showcasing along the edge of a bed.

regions, they die completely back to the ground in winter. Different daylily species and selections bloom at different times of the season—and even at different times of day (or night)—so that’s another important characteristic to consider when selecting plants for the garden.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention the issue of deer, which find daylily flower buds particularly tasty. If deer regularly visit your garden, your choices are to continually apply repellents or put in fencing.

FOLIAGE AND FORM

As a seasoned garden designer, I know color is the first thing most gardeners want to address, yet it is the last thing you should think about when designing a garden. I will get to flower color later, but first let’s talk about form. When I speak of form, I’m referring to the overall shape of the plant. Each plant has a specific shape, and understanding and appreciating that shape is key to a good garden design.

The form of a daylily is made up of two components, the leaves and the scapes—the leafless stems that emerge from the foliage and bear the flowers. Though foliage is not the primary concern of most daylily hybridizers, creating a balance between these two parts is important to the overall look of the daylily. For instance, daylilies with short foliage and tall scapes look gangly or tipsy; those with tall foliage and short scapes look squat.

I polled a few colleagues on their daylily likes and dislikes and discovered I am not the only one who admires daylily foliage. Kit Haesloop, president of the Northwest Perennial Alliance and curator of the organization’s display border at the Bellevue Botanical Garden near Seattle, also finds the foliage attractive. The 80 cultivars they grow in the 22,000-square-foot border are as important for their foliage as for their flowers. Haesloop notes ‘Malja’ and the variegated ‘Kwanso’ are two cultivars grown primarily for their foliage.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, where I garden, daylilies can begin to emerge as early as January. The fresh green tufts are much appreciated at that time of year. And as spring starts transitioning into summer, daylilies can help mask the fading foliage of spring bulbs and ephemeral wildflowers. The classic combination of daffodils and daylilies has been well documented, for example.

Once the scapes begin to emerge from the fans of leaves, the older leaves often begin to collapse and die. And some daylily species lose their foliage before the scapes begin to emerge. This “failing” foliage syndrome, which seems to be hardwired into the genus, is one of the primary reasons why daylilies require careful garden placement.

Over time, I have developed a few techniques for working around this inevitable late-summer garden disaster. First, I plant daylilies behind late-emerging perennials such as warm-season grasses and milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) so I get to enjoy the fresh

young foliage. Then, by the time the plant is crashing, the foreground plants are covering any unsightly mess. Second, having tired of the task of stripping the old foliage off—which inevitably leads to a total collapse—I now cut the daylilies back hard instead. While this does shorten the overall bloom period, it forces the growth of fresh new foliage that looks good well into autumn. This is especially effective with early bloomers, but I have also tried it successfully with late bloomers. Evergreen daylilies can be treated this way almost any time of year, since they are continually producing new foliage.

The other aspect of a daylily form is the scape. There are three types of scapes: top-branched, well-branched, and low-branched. Top-branched tends to crowd all the flowers near the top, while low-branched can have some flowers opening low in the foliage. Well-branched types have evenly spaced branching set above the foliage. A well-branched, open scape to my eye is the ideal, allowing flowers plenty of room to develop.

“For us, a daylily needs to be three feet or taller to have much garden merit,” says Tony Avent, owner of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina. Among the taller cultivars he recommends is ‘Autumn Minaret’, a selection that can top out near six feet tall, and one of my own favorites. Haesloop concurs, saying she finds the flowers more visible when they are held high above the foliage. Recent trends among hybridizers also seem to favor selections with taller, well-branched scapes.

Two of my favorites—‘Barnegat Light’ and ‘Peak Experience’—come from daylily hybridizers Margo Reed and Jim Murphy of Woodhenge Gardens in North Garden, Virginia. I love the way both, planted midway in the border, send their flowers above the other perennials where they float like butterflies.

Of course, not all of us have gardens with the scale for borders that can accommodate towering daylilies. Smaller gardens call for something a little more reasonable,

petite even, so here’s where the sheer diversity among daylily cultivars comes in handy. Low-growing or dwarf selections, whose tight habit gives them an almost formal effect, make terrific edge-of-the-border plants. I usually don’t like daylilies planted *en masse*, but small daylilies are perfect for lining borders and walkways.

FACTORING IN BLOOM TIME

Daylilies come with a surprising range of bloom times, starting with the extra-early ones that will bloom as early as March in the South and May in the North, to very late bloomers, which will bloom in late summer in the South and fall in the North.

We all know a daylily flower, as its common name suggests, only lasts a day. But when those flowers open, and how long they stay open, is another key factor in selection. The American Daylily Society (ADS) divides daylilies into three categories: diurnal, opening in the morning and closing in the evening; nocturnal, opening in the evening and closing in the morning;



A good place to see daylilies effectively used in design is at the Northwest Perennial Alliance border at Bellevue Botanical Garden in Seattle. Here, statuesque ‘Autumn Minaret’, left foreground, and shorter ‘Hyperion Elite’, right rear, grow in mixed beds flanking a gravel path.



Left: Compact or dwarf daylilies like 'Mighty Chestnut' should be planted at the front of a border or with low-growing companions like *Alchemilla mollis*. Bottom left: The brightly colored flowers of some daylilies can be hard to match, but here the orange flowers of 'Flasher' complement the burgundy foliage of surrounding shrubs in landscape designer Karen Chapman's garden in Duvall, Washington.



and extended bloomers, which stay open 16 hours no matter when they've opened.

I learned a lesson about paying attention to daylily bloom time the hard way. I had planted daylilies as part of a design at a client's house and was invited over to attend an evening party. Just as the party got started, the daylilies closed up shop for the day. Chastened by this experience, the following year I replaced those with nocturnal daylilies, which open at the perfect time for evening entertaining.

If you like to spend evenings outdoors, be aware that many nocturnal daylilies come with the bonus of fragrance. My favorite is *H. citrina* var. *vespertina*, a six-foot-tall species with luminous yellow-green flowers that seem to glow at twilight. The flowers often stay open well into the next morning.

COORDINATING COLOR

There were no daylilies in my mother's garden back in the 1960s, when I was growing up in Wisconsin. The only one I knew was the tawny daylily (*H. fulva*), an invasive weed not only in Wisconsin, but throughout the eastern half of this continent, and in isolated pockets further west. So, before I knew better, I thought of daylilies as wildflowers.

Perhaps that explains why in my early days as a designer I always chose orange daylilies. Once I got over my initial obsession with orange, however, I went wild buying daylilies of all hues. And what colors there are: bloody reds and delicious peaches, prudent purples and screaming yellows, and of course, a whole range of oranges. And these colors can be blended or bicolored; they can be picoteed, tipped, or dotted; they can have an eye, a band, a halo or a watermark; their irregularities may appear as flakes, flecks, speckles, or stipples.

Appealing as all these choices are, the danger lies in impulse ordering of gorgeously colored flowers that don't match up with the garden's prevailing scheme. As my space for daylilies has shrunk and my designer's

Sources

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www.blueridgedaylilies.com.

Heavenly Gardens, Galloway, OH.
www.heavenlygardens.com.

Oakes Daylilies, Corryton, TN.
www.oakesdaylilies.com.

Woodhenge Gardens, North Garden, VA.
www.daylily.net/piedmontperennials.

Resources

American Daylily Society,
www.daylilies.org.

Daylilies: The Perfect Perennial
by Lewis and Nancy Hill, Storey
Publishing, Pownal, VT, 1991.

The New Encyclopedia of Daylilies
by Ted L. Petit and John P. Peat,
Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2008.

eye has improved, I've learned to hone my appetite. In recent years I have gravitated toward a softer color palette. I now count pale pink 'Pale Ale' and near white 'Lime Frost' among my favorites for their muted and amenable coloration. A restricted color scheme has certainly helped me get past the obstacle of limitless choices.

Another lesson I learned was to be wary of creating combinations based on photos in catalogs. I ordered a daylily called 'Big Blue' many years ago because the flowers looked really blue in the catalog photo. Yet when it bloomed in my garden it turned out to be a dull purple. I have moved that clump of "blue" daylilies seven times in the last five years—sometimes while in full bloom—trying to find a place where the odd color works. Finally, in near desperation, I plunked them in the background with some bear's breeches (*Acanthus mollis*). The next summer when they bloomed the pairing was perfect, so they are there to stay.

MOVEABLE FEAST

That last story illustrates one of daylilies' greatest assets in the garden: their portability and adaptability. Their fibrous to fleshy roots are a storehouse of energy, which makes them among the easiest perennials to divide or transplant. I move my daylilies every few years, not just for the health of the plants but for the sheer fun of experimenting with new color combinations or more dramatic foliar effects.



The author moved the daylily cultivar 'Big Blue' seven times in his garden before he finally found an appropriate color pairing with bear's breeches (*Acanthus mollis*).

In my experience, daylilies seem to be okay in just about any garden situation, except full shade. They are often touted as drought tolerant, but many are adaptable to soggy sites and can be used "as marginal aquatics in bogs and along pond edges," says Tony Avent. My personal collection of over 60 cultivars is growing in the Snoqualmie River flood plain in western Washington, which is regularly inundated during the rainy season and just plain wet the rest of the time. There is not one unhappy plant in the bunch. That said, not all daylilies will take these conditions, so some advance research is required.

RESEARCH FIRST

Indeed, research is probably the best advice I can give if you are considering adding daylilies to your garden. With tens of thousands of garden-worthy daylilies out

there, it is impossible for one resource or article to provide all the answers for which ones will work best in your garden. Visit local botanical gardens and nurseries and take notes on growth habits, color combinations, and bloom time. There are over 300 official ADS Display Gardens in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and you can locate these via the ADS website.

I have seen daylilies in parking lots and in home gardens; I have seen them in public gardens and collector's gardens. I have even seen them in the wild, growing as weeds along the fencerows of Wisconsin and as wildflowers in the mountain bogs of Japan. I feel like I know a lot about them, but there is still so much to learn. 

A landscape designer and writer, Daniel Mount lives on a small farm in the Snoqualmie River Valley of Washington.