Daylilies

Daylilies are easy to grow, long-lived, low maintenance, and relatively pest free. More than 35,000 varieties (cultivars) have been registered. Several thousand are available commercially.

Drawing by Cheryl Postlewait, used with permission.

Characteristics

The botanic name for daylily, *Hemerocallis*, means "beautiful for a day" in Greek. While individual flowers last only one day, plants produce a succession of blooms over a period of three to four weeks. Some reblooming cultivars, such as 'Stella de Oro', bloom for 10 weeks or more.

Daylilies normally have 22 chromosomes and are referred to as diploid (2n). Tetraploid (4n) cultivars have double the number of chromosomes or 44. In most cases the chromosome number is important only for those interested in plant breeding. However, many tetraploid cultivars have flowers that are larger and more intensely colored than diploid cultivars.

Daylily foliage can be categorized as dormant (most cultivars), evergreen, and semi-evergreen. The foliage of dormant daylilies dies back to the ground in fall. Evergreen cultivars retain their leaves throughout the year. Semi-evergreen daylilies retain their leaves when grown in the southern United States, but die back to the ground in northern areas. The arching foliage consists of long linear leaves that grow 1 to 2 feet in height.

The erect, leafless flower stalks (scapes) rise from the crown of the plant and extend above the foliage. The scapes of most cultivars range in height from 12 inches to 5 feet. Modern daylily cultivars commonly produce 15 or more flowers per scape.
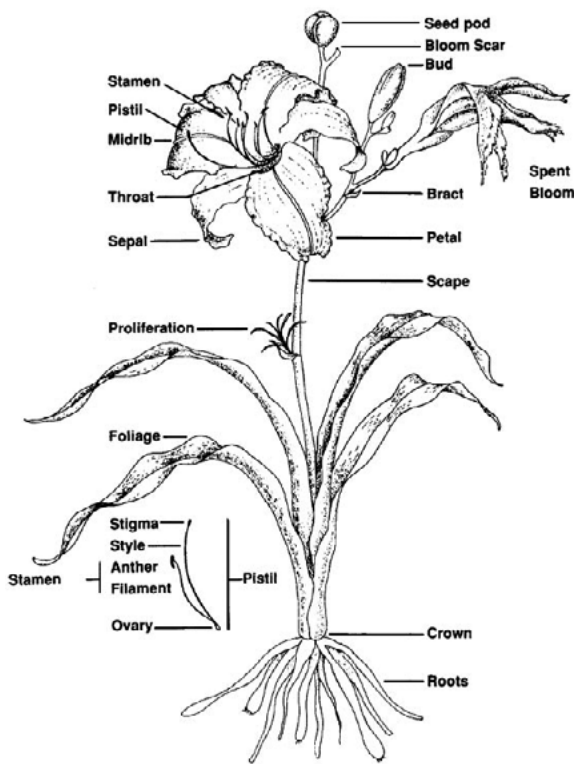
Early flowering cultivars bloom in late spring to early summer. A large percentage of cultivars bloom early to mid-summer. Others bloom late summer to frost.

Daylily flowers are available in virtually every color of the rainbow with the exception of true blue. Some cultivars have attractive eyes and throats. Flower diameters range from less than 2 inches (miniature cultivars) to more than 8 inches.

The root systems of daylily plants vary from an almost fibrous type to the common fleshy type. The root systems of some daylilies consist of underground stems or rhizomes that spread through the soil.

Growth needs

Daylilies perform best in full sun. Though tolerant of poor sites, they grow best in soils that are well-drained and possess abundant organic matter. If fertilized heavily, the foliage will be overgrown and flowering will be poor. One application of a complete fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, in early spring should be adequate. Natural rainfall is usually sufficient for daylilies. However, during prolonged dry periods, a thorough soaking once a week is usually beneficial.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Extension and Outreach

Permanent mulches—such as wood chips, grass clippings, or shredded leaves—conserve water, discourage weeds, and cool the soil. Protective winter mulches should be applied to newly planted daylilies in late fall. Once established (experienced one winter), most daylilies do not need winter protection. Some of the evergreen cultivars are less winter hardy and require continued winter protection. Winter mulches should be light and airy. Coarse materials such as straw work well.

Remove dead plant debris in late fall or early spring. Check plants regularly during the growing season and remove damaged or yellowed leaves. Also, remove spent flowers regularly unless seeds are desired.

Propagation

Daylilies are normally propagated by division. Daylily clumps can be divided every three to five years. Dig up the entire clump with a spade. Carefully pull the clump apart by hand or divide the clump into sections with a large knife or spade. Each division should consist of 2 or 3 fans of leaves and a good root system.

Drawing by Tom Hiett, used with permission.

Daylilies can be divided in spring as new growth is emerging or in September. Set the plants so the crown (the point where the roots and foliage meet) is about an inch below the soil surface. Space plants at least 2 feet apart.

Daylilies also can be grown from seeds. Seeds require 6 weeks of stratification before sowing and 3 to 7 weeks to germinate. Plants from seed will not be identical to their parent.

Landscape uses

Daylilies can be used as specimens or planted in large masses. Tall cultivars make good background plantings behind lower growing annuals and perennials. Small cultivars can be used as edgers along walks or as foreground plantings.

Daylilies also can be effectively used on slopes where their vigorous root systems help hold the soil and reduce erosion. If space is limited, small and miniature cultivars can be grown in containers.

Types of daylily flowers

Several terms may be used to describe daylily flowers.

Single
Photo by Pat Loveland.
Flower consists of 3 petals and 3 sepals.

Double
Photo by Terrie Mann.
Flower has more than 1 petal whorl or a stamen whorl that contains petal-like stamens.

Circular
Photo by Arthur M. Kroll.
Flower appears to be round when viewed from the front of the bloom.

Triangular
Photo by Tim Fehr.
Petals and sepals form a triangle when viewed from the front of the bloom.

Star
Photo by Brian Mahleu.
Petals and sepals are long and pointed. There is space between the petals and sepals. Flower appears to be a three-pointed or six-pointed star when viewed from the front of the bloom.

Flat
Photo by Rebecca Board.
The flower is flat, except for the concave throat, when viewed from the side of the bloom.

Trumpet
Photo by Brian Mahleu.
Flower resembles a true lily when viewed from side.

Recurved
Photo by Tim Fehr.
When viewed from the side of the bloom, the ends of the petals and sepals (sometimes just the sepals) roll back or tuck under.

Pinched
Photo by Bob Schwarz.
Flower petals are pinched or folded.

For more information

Horticultural information is available from your local Iowa State University Extension office and from these Web sites.

https://store.extension.iastate.edu/
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu