

THE STORY OF PLANTS: DAYLILIES

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LAST WEEK, AS I WAS PURGING the pounds of winter garden catalogues that had accumulated around the house, I stopped to page through one from a daylily nursery. It was a dangerous tome with its close-up shots of daylilies flung open with garish seductive abandon. I flipped pages quickly so as not to be tempted, then a monstrosity stopped my roving eye: ‘Exploded Pumpkin’.

“Exploded Pumpkin! What kind of name is that for a daylily?” I yelled to Michael who was cooking dinner in the kitchen. Then I jumped up and ran to the kitchen, catalogue pages flapping.

“Look at this monstrosity!” I wailed as I shoved the catalogue between Michael and the simmering pot he tended. “They even have the gall to boast that it *“Reblooms!”* Capital R, *italics*, and exclamation point all theirs.

A flat “yuck”—my sentiments exactly—issued from his mouth, when he saw the gnarl of orange petals they were trying pass off as a flower. Now we are not exactly daylily snobs or even enthusiasts; we actually gave up collecting them. After we lost 350 dahlias to the horrific 2008/09 flood season, daylilies seemed like the perfect rebound plant: plenty of variety—as of 2000 there were over 40,000 registered daylily cultivars—easy to grow; no digging, storing, and replanting every year; and cold and wet hardy.

We began higgledy-piggledy, like all collectors destined for a downfall. We got cheap ones and free ones, and a lot of orange ones. After about 50 daylilies we decided to focus on a few choice ones. We steered clear of the ruffled and



Hemerocallis ‘Lime Frost’ (Daniel Mount)

doubled; they have a hard time opening in our cool summer mornings. We avoided the early bloomers that are slug fodder in our rainy Junes, and the short ones that hid in the weeds and were often beheaded during our mind-numbing hours of weedwacking. We tightened our choices to the tallest and latest blooming, and the fragrant. Yes, there are beautifully fragrant daylilies.

Now we have about 10 favorites and about 60 we wished we’d never planted, which bloom with such enthusiasm we can’t purge them. Of the tallest, we love the statuesque evening blooming and fragrant ‘Notify Ground Crew’. In a client’s garden I needed late bloomers to coincide with a yearly party. ‘Barnegat Light’ and ‘Coral Majority’ have turned out to be

stunners with enough height to be at home in the middle of the border. I am smitten with ‘Pale Ale’, a pallid yet complex beauty with an elegant fragrance. Michael stoops to ‘Hosanna’, a fragrant mango beauty and one of our first and continued favorites.

It is speculated that daylilies (*Hemerocallis*, a genus of only 18 species) have been cultivated in their native China since the third millennium B.C. First documented in a T’ang Dynasty *Materia Medica* (a book of pharmacology) in 656 A.D., they were noted for their ability to strengthen the will power, give happiness, reduce worry, and lighten the body weight, a wonder drug of that time. They were known as *Lu Tsung* (deer-onion), but also *Wang Yu* (forget-worry) and *Liao Chou* (curing-melancholy).

The wonder that is modern daylilies began in the U.S. in the 1940s, when it was discovered that treating daylilies with colchicine (a pale-yellow crystalline alkaloid extracted from seeds or corms of *Colchicum*) doubled their chromosomal number. This led to the tetraploids, having four sets of chromosomes in each plant cell. Tetraploids have bigger flowers with heavier substance and more vibrant colors. Now one can buy purple, pink, or blue daylilies. You can buy ruffled and doubled, striped and strapped, ringed and blinged, and now, even exploded!

You can see why I have favored the ungilding of the daylily and grow 12 different white-flowered forms.

But don’t worry, it’s not a collection. 🌸

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