

Culture Tips From The Experts

Winner of 1990 AHS Best Article About Daylily Culture

by Mickey Sanders

(Reprinted from 1990 Spring Region 6 Newsletter)

As Program Chairman for the Houston Area Daylily Society, I wanted to start our year of programs with information that would help our members have show-off gardens. Who better to turn to than those expert growers of daylilies who live in areas of similar climatic conditions. Experts throughout the South and Gulf Coast regions were consulted. Like daylily enthusiasts everywhere, they were generous with their time and sent me copious notes on their methods which lead to their success with daylilies. I hope that, you find these tips as worthwhile as I have.

CHOOSING THE SITE

Mable Nelson, past RVP for Region 6, considers the site as the most important ingredient for success with daylilies. A location that provides at least a half day sun, preferably morning, is necessary.

Joyce Lewis, past RVP Region 6, also believes that a gardener can achieve good results so long as the plants receive five or six hours of sun daily.

Kelly Wall, grower and hybridizer from Mississippi, advises choosing a site away from the roots of trees and shrubs, if possible.

Erling Grovenstein, who answers questions on culture in The Daylily Journal tells us that, location is the first consideration in planting daylilies. For full enjoyment of daylilies in the home garden, some light shade is essential. The shade benefits the blooms (they do not wilt or badly fade) and the observers (they do not collapse or retreat into the air conditioning). For rapid increase, as in commercial gardens, full sun is preferable. Drainage is also an important aspect of site selection. Daylily beds need to be moist but NOT wet for any appreciable time. The side of a hill or raised beds are recommended.

SOIL PREPARATION

Lee Gates, hybridizer extraordinaire, is known for his thorough soil preparation. The following is a capsulized account of his efforts to break up heavy soil and improve vertical drainage and aeration: 1) Six months before preparation, kill all weeds with Roundup. 2) At preparation time, till existing soil as deeply as possible. 3) Add two inches of concrete sand (masonry sand is too fine and river sand will pack) . 4) Add 4" of ground pine bark or other organic matter. 5) Top dress with fertilizer appropriate to the needs your soil. 6) Till the planting area.

Ed Beckham, grower of daylilies and Amaryllis, prepares his soil by adding peat moss, bark soil conditioner, potting soil, perlite, and a good balanced fertilized such as Ortho 8-8-8 with all elements. This is tilled into existing soil.

Rudy Pacas, who maintains an extraordinary Display Garden in Louisiana, suggests incorporating humus in the form of bark, peat moss, rotten saw dust, leaf mold, composted rice hulls, and manure into the garden soil. Have the soil tested and then adjust the pH to between 6.5 and 6.8.

Nell McCreery, owner of a 1989 National Tour Garden, uses tons of ground mulch both in the soil and on top as a dressing. She grinds leaves, pine straw, kitchen scraps (vegetation

only), grass clippings, etc. The old decayed mulch is worked into the soil. The mulch that is not yet rotting is used as a top dressing.

Bill Monroe, former AHS Registrar and outstanding gardener, advises adding sand if soil is heavy clay as well as organic material such as compost or peat moss. Thoroughly cultivate the soil and use fertilizer as indicated by a soil test. Both the surface and sub-soil should be well drained.

L. P. Townsend, noted Mississippi gardener, also adds sand to loosen heavy soil. He incorporated 48 yards in one year alone. Needless to say his is not your average size garden.

Mable Nelson believes that any soil is acceptable so long as it is loose and easy to work.

Mr. Merle Kent, famed Florida grower, examines soil with water retention in mind. The water must percolate through the soil at the right rate. So it becomes a question of giving the soil the right amount of water retentive ability. If the soil is sandy, add materials that will increase water retention peat, muck, or compost. If the soil is totally unsuitable, retaining walls can be made of crossties with topsoil brought in to fill the bed.

E. R. Joiner, hybridizer of 1989 President's Cup winner, FRANCES JOINER, prepares soil by adding 4" to 6" of ground pine bark, then tilling as deeply as possible two or three times.

Joyce Lewis strives for a medium textured soil containing balanced amounts of sand, silt, and clay. To achieve this add humus, peat moss, sand, clay, or compost depending upon the soil you have to work with.

Bill Munson, Jr., Florida grower and hybridizer of note, advises adding humus, manure, and whatever supplements ones soil requires. However, daylily beds don't have to be too rich for a good performance from a daylily.

Erling Grovenstein - "It makes gardening easier on the gardener and is much better for the plants if the garden soil has a good texture (easier to dig in and for roots to pierce and for plant food and moisture to penetrate). Synthetic soil conditioners are available, but the time honored procedure is to add natural organic matter to the soil such as well rotted cow manure, peat, moss, or ground pine bark."

HOW TO PLANT

Bill Monroe tells us to plant as soon as possible after digging, plant shallow, plant in the Fall of the year, and water well after planting.

Lee Gates advises spreading the roots of the daylilies out "over soil that is raised in an inverted ice cream cone form in the planting hole. The plant should not be planted deeper than ½" above the crown. In the extreme South, barely covering the crown is preferable.

WATER

E. R. Joiner - "The most important program in daylily culture is water, don't let them get dry in the blooming season."

Mable Nelson and Lee Gates both emphasize that water is the one most important element in daylily culture. Give them lots of water in the Spring when they are setting scapes and buds. Continue watering throughout, the bloom season to maintain bloom size and performance.

Nell McCreery, Mr. Townsend, and Erling Grovenstein all advise installing a permanent watering system.

Bill Ater, former AHS President, reminds us that plants can only take up fertilizer as a liquid so soil must be kept moist for ten days to two weeks after applying any fertilizer.

Bill Munson tells us to water heavily. Flower size, color, bud count, and increase will be greatly improved by generous amounts of water.

Marvin Granger, hybridizer of daylilies and Louisiana Iris, tells of an accidental discovery. He had planted some Louisiana Irises next to a group of daylilies. When the Irises were flooded during the Summer and Winter, the daylilies were flooded, also. The daylilies which received this extra water were bigger, healthier, and their blossoms were larger than his other plants.

L. B. Townsend uses 13-13-13 and in addition drops about a tablespoon of ammonium nitrate between each plant.

Lee Gates applies 1 ½ pounds of 12-6-6 per 100 square feet. This is done the last of February and again in mid-April.

Bill Ater applies a high nitrogen fertilizer with sulphur (some as high as 21-0-0-24) in February while soil is cool and fertilizer will be available to plants as soil becomes warmer. He applies a balanced fertilizer such as 8-8-8 or 13-13-13 in mid-March. One half cup Milorganite and one cup or more cottonseed meal per clump is applied in early May and again in October or November for slow Summer and Winter feeding.

Kelly Wall also relies on cottonseed meal as fertilizer.

Erling Grovenstein tells us that nitrogen is usually needed because nitrogen compounds are water soluble and tend to be biodegraded and lost from the soil. He uses ammonium nitrate bountifully just as the dormant daylilies are beginning to emerge. It is necessary to water it in well. At the same time he lightly sprinkles Osmocote (slow release nitrogen) on the daylily beds.

Mable Nelson fertilizes with 8-8-8, 13-13-13, or 12-24-12 in Spring then uses a water soluble fertilizer as a drench about six weeks before bloom season. The liquid fertilizer is poured around the plants.

Mr. Munson advises fertilizing three times a year. Twice in the Spring and once in the early Fall. Spring fertilization should begin at the first sign of Spring, and be repeated in four to six weeks.

Merle Kent uses a good grade of 6-6-6 100% organic fertilizer with the secondary elements added. He believes it is worth the difference over the cheaper chemical fertilizer.

Mr. Joiner feeds heavily with a slow release fertilizer 12-4-8 at the beginning of Spring. In April, he uses Milorganite.

Joyce Lewis gives us a comprehensive fertilizing program. "When it comes to buying fertilizer, I like to stick to tested materials and let other people use the "miracle" fertilizers, soil conditioners, soil builders, plant growth stimulants, soil activators, organic humates, etc.

The so called "Fertilizer Bill of Rights" is:

The RIGHT fertilizer

The RIGHT rate

The RIGHT placement

The RIGHT timing of application

The greatest demand for nutrients comes as dormancy is broken and plants begin to grow profusely. Apply a complete fertilizer during the latter part of February. Too much nitrogen will cause excessive vegetative growth and delay maturity so it should be balanced with other nutrients. Daylilies have immense root systems so don't place nitrogen fertilizers too close to the plants since the ammonia given off when acted upon by the soil can be toxic to plants. Any good humus soil contains all the micro-nutrients a daylily needs so I add none. Too much of most any of the 16 essential elements known to man needed for plant production can do more damage than not enough.

MULCH

Erling Grovenstein recommends using organic matter in the form of a mulch. Pine bark, pine straw or leaves are suitable. Mulches tend to conserve soil moisture, reduce weeds, stop soil erosion, and give the bed a neater appearance. Organic matter may deplete nitrogen and thus necessitate additional nitrogen.

Rudy Pacas uses mulch to give the plants protection in the Winter and help in the control of weeds. Pine straw or other material which gives a natural appearance is his preference.

Bill Monroe advises using any mulching material which is available since mulch conserves moisture and prevents weeds and cold damage.

Merle Kent's favorite mulching material is Oak leaves as they are plentiful and break down into good humus.

CHOOSING THE PLANTS

David Kirchhoff, AHS Director, advocates daylilies which are best adapted to the grower's area. It behooves all gardeners and all who love and appreciate the daylily's versatility to resist the daylily that proves to be of the weaker type. Look beyond the obvious. Consider the entire plant - for its garden beauty and garden value. Obviously the healthiest, strongest plant is the most desirable. Plant smart, grow smart - and your daylily gardening experience can only be that much more enriching.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

Gene Orgeron, RVP Region 6 - "Has your latest \$50 cultivar failed to produce? Is one of your old reliables just sitting there this year? Is last year's choice seedling not living up to its promise? If you have any of these problems, there may be an easy solution. Just check to see if the depth of planting is correct. The junction of crown and roots should be just barely below ground level, and if it is much deeper, the plant may be suffering. The plant may have been planted properly, but later sinking or compacting of the bed could have caused this. Heavy mulching might also contribute to this. I think seedlings sometimes just pull themselves deeper as they grow. In any case, just changing the level of planting will effect a cure.

David Kirchhoff tells us to avoid using Kelthane which can be toxic to daylilies.

Both Joyce Lewis and Rudy Pacas encourage a soil test for pH. Without the proper pH, your daylilies will not be able to draw nutrients from the soil even if they are there in abundance. A slightly acid soil (6.8) is best suited for daylilies. Lime will raise the pH (make it more alkaline) and sulfur will lower the pH (make it more acidic).

Rudy also encourages dividing daylilies when bloom declines and the decline is not the result of a lack of fertilizer, water, or other good culture practices.

Mr. Townsend uses birth control tablets on all his better daylilies to produce extra increase. He did not mention what he tells the doctor in order to get the prescription.

To conclude this compilation of tips from those whom we acknowledge as experts, I would like to quote from the wit and wisdom of Joyce Lewis. "I think daylilies were put on this earth to enjoy. Whatever goal a person sets concerning themselves and their daylilies, they should not go beyond the fun stage. If it's fun to go ahead and incorporate every recommended procedure to grow a perfect daylily, then shoot for your goal, but should the process become a chore that ceases to be fun, just

slack off and watch Nature and the daylily work together to continue to make you happy and give thanks that you like to grow daylilies!"