

Growing Daylilies In Containers

Winner of AHS Best Article Demonstrating An Aspect Of Daylily Gardening

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(Reprinted from 2005 Spring Region 6 Newsletter)

If you're like me, the desire to grow new daylilies outstrips the space in your garden beds. I find myself at the end of each growing season with several daylilies in one-gallon pots with no space in the ground to plant them. The result of this annual overflow has been that I've learned how to grow daylilies in containers. Some plants now live permanently in pots. Others have eventually found their way into the ground when I've made space by removing less attractive ones. This selection and moving around is part of my annual gardening tasks, now. I've also learned that container growing is often a good testing method for daylilies, a way to determine if they have rust, to find out how vigorous they are or what conditions they like. Containers also provide a way to rescue a plant that is not doing well and a way to increase the vigor of new, small fans so they are more likely to survive when they go into the ground. Containers expand growing space, especially in a small yard.

If you're thinking about trying to grow daylilies in containers, the first considerations are the size of the container and how to prepare it for the plant. The bigger, the better, is a good approach to selecting one. A large container provides root room, protects the plant from frost and keeps the roots cool in Summer heat. Big containers filled with soil are heavy, however, so you either have to locate the container with the understanding that you will not move it or put it on a platform base with well functioning wheels, so it can be moved. Probably a diameter of at least 14 inches wide with a height of 14 inches is a minimum size for growing a plant for a year. Very large containers and half barrels will work well for the largest size and more permanent growing. Many of mine are glazed ceramic pots over 24 inches wide and 24 inches tall. The glazing appears to prevent the pot from fracturing during Winter from the effects of the expansion of water when it freezes. Some people have also told me that a layer of bubble wrap on the inside of a ceramic container before soil is added will provide sufficient flexible cushioning to protect the container from cracking in Winter from freezing and thawing. Another choice is a large plastic pot, which is much lighter. Of course, there should always be good drainage at the bottom, so the container must have holes, or water standing in the bottom will create disease and rot. I don't use saucers under the pots for that reason.

Soil-based growing mix is probably the best growing medium to use in the pot. Artificial growing mediums tend to dry out too quickly and don't hold water as well. The commercial soil-based potting mixes have usually been sterilized so that soil born diseases are less likely to occur at the outset. A layer of pot shards or stones at the bottom of the pot will help drainage, but if you use them, you probably should put a thin layer of charcoal over them before the soil is added to prevent the soil from turning sour over time. Once you have filled the pot with the mix, you should wet the soil thoroughly before you plant. Potting soil from a bag as a rule doesn't wet through easily, so this means you have to soak the pot several times and let the water drain before you plant.

If you aren't sterilizing new plants as a regular procedure, you should soak the roots to be planted in a pot in a dilute solution of peroxide or Clorox and water for half a day to discourage bacteria. You can also dust the whole plant with fungicide, if you wish. Dipping roots in growth hormone after that is also a good idea, but not absolutely necessary. Dig a good hole in the pot by removing some soil and setting it aside and mix some slow-release fertilizer in the bottom of the hole where the roots of the plant are likely to be. Make a mound at the bottom of the hole and spread the roots over the top, then backfill the hole with the soil you have set aside. The crown of the plant should just be under the surface of the soil. Next, water the plant thoroughly to remove any air pockets and let the soil settle. You may need to add more soil so that the crown is at least covered once the soil has settled. You can also put about one inch of organic mulch on the top, but the mulch should not crowd against the

stem of the plant, The mulch will prevent the surface from drying out. Another mulch technique is to plant an annual groundcover like alyssum around the base of the plant, which will help to hold in moisture and keep the crown of the plant cool. Low growing plants will also make the pot more interesting when the daylily is not in bloom.

Watering the pots is not as hard or done as often as you might think if you have planted in pretty big pots, placed them where they get some shade in the hottest part of the day and grouped some pots together. In Zone 7 Albuquerque where we have strong ultraviolet light and intense heat in the middle of the Summer at our high altitude, plants grow well in an East-facing yard where they get morning sun and afternoon shade. They also grow in other orientations where they are on the edge of shade provided by shrubs or a tree. I water my pots every three days with a hose in the middle of the Summer and less often in cooler weather. You may have to add more slow-release fertilizer in mid-season, since plants in pots are watered more often than in the ground and the fertilizer tends to wash out before the Summer is over. In the coldest part of the Winter I only water the pots once a month during a warm period and never when they are frozen on the top.

Some plants have such big, vigorous root systems that they may last in a pot only one year and you have to give them a bigger pot or put them in the ground after that. Others do not grow so fast or so big and can last three years before they need to be divided. A periodic task for all daylilies in pots is dividing the plants when they start to outgrow their pots, cleaning the containers and replacing the soil. You have to see how fast any plant increases in size in one season to decide whether you have to move or divide it. Many of the shorter small and miniature daylilies thrive in pots because their roots are not as big. Small daylilies in large pots are almost at eye-level when you are sitting in a chair, so they can be seen better than in the ground. I have grown two SILOAM DOODLEBUG plants in a large pot for several years grouped with several other containers of companion plants at various levels.

The daylilies bloom for a long time and when they cease, the leaves provide a good foil for the other containers so that the group as a whole is very good-looking. I planted CHANCE ENCOUNTER in a pot and it outgrew the container in one season, but it bloomed vigorously that year. In another part of my patio, I have some mid-sized daylilies growing right next to a chair and when I sit down I look right into the blossoms. Containers allow you to see daylilies up close.

Sometimes you have a plant in the ground that just doesn't do much over several years. Try growing it in a pot for awhile. The plant will increase its size and root system a lot faster in the warmer and looser soil in the pot, and may adapt to your conditions better even before it is put in the ground. Here in Albuquerque, where we don't yet have much of a problem with rust, a lot of people are growing all of their new daylilies in pots for a year before putting them into the ground to make sure there is no rust. Often a plant with it can even be cured in the pot by the combination of the effect of the Winter cold and the use of a fungicide. You can also isolate any problem and reduce the chances of soil contamination for both rust and any other disease if you follow the practice of planting new plants in pots for a year or two.

If your pot is wide and deep enough, you can add some shallower growing annual or perennial plants in the pot around the daylily to create interest for the whole season. I've planted Heuchera (Coral Bells), small Zinnias, Alyssum, Diaschia, and Gomphrena, among others, in my daylily pots, with great success. The pots look good all through the Summer and Fall. Some of these plants self-seed so that you get returning blooms the next season. You do have to divide the perennials and thin out the seeded plants in the Spring, however, so the daylilies don't get too crowded.

Container growing is a way to try out plants and experiment, to create color and interest in sitting areas each year, and to supplement your growing beds with places where you can sit and enjoy your daylily plants up close and personal.