

# ***A Daylily Is Just A Daylily. Right?***

That's what I thought when I was first asked us to grow 2-gallon Daylilies. My opinion was they're wild things that bloom orange along the roadside for a couple weeks: who needs them! But to keep the customer happy I located some starter plants: five variations of orange.

We grew a crop and sold them in spite of their shortcomings: only 3 weeks bloom, weak foliage, a tendency to rot and marginal hardiness (which we couldn't understand): catalogs listed Daylilies as hardy to -30° F; our normal low is about 0 yet we were losing plants to the winter. I thought, If gardeners are willing to buy these despite their flaws, what would the potential be if they had better traits? But a Daylily is just a Daylily, right?

I got a reference book and read an incredible fact: "There are over 35,000 officially registered cultivars of Daylilies." If that's so they can't all be short season plants in variations of orange: there has to be something better. I also read that a popular hybridizer lived across the state line. I made an appointment. I pulled into Dr. Darrel Apps' place on a July morning and knew right away I'd found something better. Shoehorned into an oversized back yard were 8,000 cultivars with more color and size choices than a Nike® outlet. Stocked from breeders worldwide they ranged in height from 1'-6', flowers 1"-10" across and rainbow colors. I'd ooh and ahh over one and Dr. Apps would say, "It's pretty in the morning but the flower breaks down in afternoon heat." On another "Spectacular bloomer but its foliage is a mite magnet." "Good plant but only flowers two weeks." "Nice, but a southern variety that won't make it through winter." So it went for 3 hours of sensory overload.

I was astonished at the diversity and impressed with his knowledge. In evaluating a Daylily he appraises 140 aspects. In frustration I asked "How can my customers know which are best? All they want is a fast plant, pretty flowers, clean foliage, hardiness, pest resistance and a long bloom. Give me a list of the ones with these qualities."

He busted out laughing, "You're not asking for much, are you?! There's no such list: what you want is the near-perfect plant: you'd only find a handful." I asked "Okay. But what about that handful?" "Well," he said "(if there are any), the only way to find them is through an assessment program. Establish a standard for each attribute you want. Kick out a cultivar if it fails in any category. Whatever is left is what you're after."

We entered into agreement: he'd do the testing then we'd go into production on any plants that passed the test. We set up criteria for the standards.

1. FAST - Gardeners want impact. Let's eliminate any variety that doesn't triple its fans each year.
2. PRETTY - Advancements show broader leaves, stronger flowers, higher bud counts. Leave out any one that doesn't reflect modern qualities.
3. CLEAN - Gardeners want durable plants that stay fresh-looking into late season. Cut ones showing significant foliar deterioration by mid-summer.
4. HARDY - Most current hybridization is done in warm regions resulting in poor hardiness. We need extra hardy stock. If it can't take at least -20° F, get rid of it.
5. PEST RESISTANT – No Daylily is 100% resistant but some are bad boys that go out looking for trouble. Cut out any one inclined toward problems.
6. LONG BLOOMING - The average Daylily is wimpy, blooming for 21 days here. Eliminate any one not blooming at least twice that (42 days).

Dr. Apps recorded data on the 8,000 cultivars at his facility. By season's end we were left with 40 that met our demands. No longer would a Daylily be just a Daylily.

We went about choosing a name for the program and someone said "I'm convinced these Daylilies are so good that if there was a contest of the world's Daylilies, these would take the trophies." Trophytaker® was born.

The approved varieties turned out to be rare and pricey. Our objective was to grow a crème-de-la-crème plant to blooming maturity in a 2g pot for a value price that would WOW gardeners at about \$15 retail. That's not easy to do when a bare root starter costs more than my kids' designer jeans. So we had to increase them on our own.

Through sources we purchased 20 of each cultivar at (ouch) \$50-150 per fan. By year two, our 20 expanded to 60. The following year to 180, then 540, and so on. At the end of year five we'd built up enough to feel comfortable selling a few.

Today, we've sold over a million Trophytaker® Daylilies. There's a good reason: they're better! I can't name another non-political, logic-based, scientific, assessment system.

Trophytaker® has name recognition and by 1996 had already ranked seventh in a national survey of familiar Daylily names. Climate-revised programs are being set up to accommodate Midwest and Southeast regions, now. Trophytakers® were recently featured on the NBC national morning program The Today Show.

Years ago, as the brand began to grow in sales and variety, we made the decision to cap the selection at 50 different cultivars. Now when we add a new daylily to the mix, we remove one that has either lost favor with gardeners or has not performed as we expected. It's easy to see now that for most of the U.S. landscape, Trophytaker® represents the 50 best daylilies in the world.

Do a comparison for yourself. You'll come to the same conclusion as I did: a Daylily is not just a Daylily: not anymore!