

HOME & GARDEN

Consider the day lily, iris

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

Autumn seems to have landed prematurely this year, and I am suddenly reminded that there is only a little time left to think about transplanting or dividing those wonderfully care-free and hardy perennials, day lilies and Siberian iris. Time is at such a premium here on our hill that these flowers become especially valuable because they do not require a soil of extraordinary fertility, have no pest problems and are virtually maintenance free. Best of all, though they are practical, they come in many beautiful colors and forms to please every gardener's taste.

Hemerocallis, the common day lily, derives its name from two Greek words — hemera for day and kallos for beautiful. It is true that each blossom is beautiful for only a single day, but the plant may keep on producing these short-lived blossoms for as long as six weeks. Day lilies have become so popular that many varieties have been developed, and that you can easily plan a day lily border that will bloom from June through September.

BETWEEN THE ROWS

Neither are you limited to the orange shades of the common roadside flower. They can be had in shades ranging from a clear yellow (Hyperion) to peach (Family Party) to pink (Master Touch) to red (Christmas Carol).

When I visited the Shearers Garden Center recently, I found that I must be going through my pink period. Almost all the day lilies were in shades of pink. There was Monica Ann and Gertrude Smith that were lovely shades of clear pink; then Vincent, a warm shade of terra cotta pink with a gold throat; and Johnny Ward, which was similar, but the colors were somewhat stronger and deeper. Bess Ross was a deep, rich scarlet (pink wasn't my only favorite), and I was absolutely delighted with a tiny day lily bearing jaunty red blossoms named Red Mittens. Most apt.

Autumn is a good time to plant day lilies for good bloom next spring. Most of them prefer a sunny location, but if they receive high or dappled shade in late afternoon, they will be even happier.

Day lilies are not exacting and will do very well on most soils as long as the drainage is good. In the best of all possible worlds, a sandy loam is the ideal.

My garden area is developing one small stage at a time, and I have started a small orchard of dwarf fruit trees adjacent to my vegetable garden. The eastern boundary is an old stone wall partially shaded by ash trees on the far side. This is where I planted a ruffled orange day lily that I found mixed in with some Siberian iris that came with the house, and I plan to add others as soon as I can.

They do not need to be divided often, perhaps every four or five years, so some care should be taken with the original

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planting. Dig a generous hole and build a cone of earth to hold up the root so the crown is only an inch below the soil level. Spread out the roots and fill in gently with soil, and water well. Because my own soil is so heavy and poor, I mix it with a small amount of peat moss and compost to enrich and lighten it.

Most people are familiar with bearded iris, and there is no denying that they are beautiful and very showy. However, the former owners of my house left me with some overcrowded and non-blooming clumps of plants that turned out to be a rich, blue Siberian iris, and I have completely lost my heart to them. I love the buds wrapped in a gossamer skin and the neat little flowers. They bloom from mid-June to mid-July, and I have already started my Christmas list by asking for Anniversary, a white Siberian iris, and Flight of Butterflies, whose tiny blossoms dance three or four on a stem and whose three-lobed petals belie the delicate appearance.

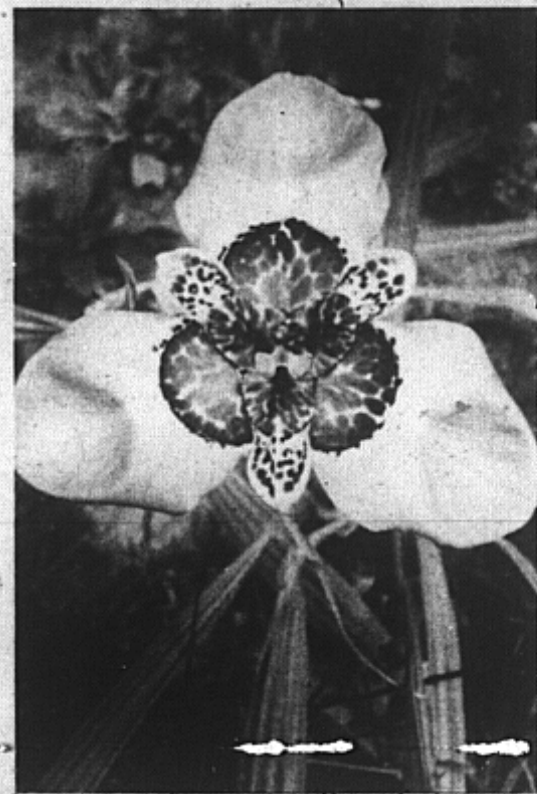
Once established, Siberian iris develop into thick clumps, and weeds find it impossible to penetrate. They need not be divided for years at a time, although, if you wish, they can be divided either in the early autumn or early spring, to multiply your plantings.

They like a good deal of sun but will tolerate light shade. I know that when I moved my clumps out from under some overgrown shrubs I did not get every plant, and even though they are in quite a lot of shade the plants I inadvertently left behind bloom beautifully — but a week or two later than the clumps I now have planted in the sun.

Because they can be left undivided for several years, they should be put into well-cultivated soil. Dig the bed to a depth of at least a foot and enrich the soil with peat moss and compost or use a low-nitrogen fertilizer. The Siberian iris develops strong roots and is quite drought resistant, but it also loves to grow where the soil is often wet, for instance, near a pond or stream.

Another advantage of the Siberian iris over the bearded iris is that it is not bothered by the iris borer, which can destroy plants, and it seems immune to other pests as well.

I spend a lot of time working in my garden, and I don't think I am a lazy gardener, but it is nice to have some plants in the border that don't need babying, and repay very little care with a lot of beauty.



Recorder/Chuck Blake

Flower power

This beautiful red Tigridia is an eye-catcher in Pam Roberts' Shearers Road, Colrain, garden on a recent sunny day.

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